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A thaumaturge
can't be a brave.

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The Shaman That Can't Become A Hero

Arc 5: Worst Harem Party

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Shiramine Academy Class 2-7 Attendance Record 2

Shiramine Academy, Class 2-7 ▪ Attendance record ▪ 41 students[1]

(TN: Author’s note: Updated with known cause of death and vocations.)

Boys ▪ 22 students

Seat No.		Name	Vocation	Affiliation
1		Azuma Shinichi		Boy’s Class Representative
2	Dead	Itou Seiji	Thief[2]	
		Dies in the first Orthus fight.		
3		Ueda Youhei		Archery club
4		Ooyama Daisuke		Karate club
5	Dead	Kousaka Hiroki	Knight	Soccer club
		Dies in Demon-Sword-wielding Boss Goma fight		
6		Saitou Masaru		Archery club
7		Sakurai Touya		Archery club
8		Satou Yuuya		
9		Shimokawa Junnosuke		
10		Sugino Takashi		Judo club
11		Souma Yuuto	Hero	Kendo club
12	Dead	Takashima Yuudai		Baseball club

Dies mysteriously in the forest.

13		Tendou Ryuichi		
14		Nakai Shouta		
15		Nakajima Haruma		Art club
16		Hayama Rewright		Basketball club[3]
17		Higuchi Kyouya		
18	Dead	Hirano Kouhei	Swordsman	Soccer club

Dies in the second Orthus fight.

19		Momokawa Kotarou	Shaman	Literature club
20		Yamakawa Junichirou		Drama club
21		Yamada Genki		Baseball club
22		Yokomichi Hajime		

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	Seat No.				Name		Vocation		Affiliation	
	1				Azuma Shinichi				Boy’s Class Representative	
	2			Dead		Itou Seiji			Thief[[tn]	
	[tn]				I’ll link the known people to their first appearance chapter; I’ll link their death chapter or death discovery chapter also if applicable. This is for your, but mostly my own, benefit for finding this stuff later.				Dies in the first Orthus fight.	
	3				Ueda Youhei				Archery club	
	4				Ooyama Daisuke				Karate club	
	5			Dead		Kousaka Hiroki			Knight	
					Dies in Demon-Sword-wielding Boss Goma fight					
	6				Saitou Masaru				Archery club	
	7				Sakurai Touya				Archery club	

8			Satou Yuuya				
9			Shimokawa Junnosuke				
10			Sugino Takashi		Judo club		
11			Souma Yuuto		Hero		Kendo club
12		Dead		Takashima Yuudai			Baseball club
	Dies mysteriously in the forest.						
13			Tendou Ryuichi				
14			Nakai Shouta				
15			Nakajima Haruma			Art club	
16			Hayama Rewright			Basketball club[/tn]	
[tn] Changing it back to Rewrite cos relight just sounds stupid.	17			Higuchi			
Kyouya							
18		Dead		Hirano Kouhei		Swordsman	
	Dies in the second Orthus fight.						
19			Momokawa Kotarou		Shaman		Literature club
20			Yamakawa Junichirou			Drama club	
21			Yamada Genki			Baseball club	
22			Yokomichi Hajime				

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Girls ▪ 19 students

Seat No.		Name	Vocation	Affiliation
31		Reina Adelhide Ayase		
32		Iijima Mayumi		
33		Kitaooji Rurika		Cooking club
34		Kizaki Akane		Volleyball club
35		Kisaragi Ryouko	Ice Mage	Girl’s Class Representative
36		Kenzaki Asuna	Dualwielder	Kendo club
37	Dead	Satou Aya	Archer	

Dies in a fight with a horde of Goma.

38		Shinohara Emi		Illustration club
39		Souma Sakura	Saintess	Archery club
40		Takanashi Kotori	Sage	
41		Nagae Yukiko		Literature club
42		Natsukawa Minami	Thief	Track and field
43	Dead	Nishiyama Minori	Wind Mage	Brass band

Dies in the second Orthus fight.

44		Nonomiya Julia		Tennis club
45		Hinagiku Saya		Archery club
46		Himeno Airi		
47		Futaba Meiko	Berserker	Cooking club
48		Yoshizaki Maria		Tennis club
49		Randou Kyouko		

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	31					Reina Adelhide Ayase							
	32					Iijima Mayumi							
	33					Kitaooji Rurika						Cooking club	
	34					Kizaki Akane						Volleyball club	
	35					Kisaragi Ryouko			Ice Mage			Girl’s Class Representative	
	36					Kenzaki Asuna			Dualwielder			Kendo club	
	37					Dead			Satou Aya			Archer	
						Dies in a fight with a horde of Goma.							
	38					Shinohara Emi						Illustration club	

39				Souma Sakura		Saintess		Archery club
40				Takanashi Kotori		Sage		
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(TN: Changing it back to Rewrite cos relight just sounds stupid.)

Chapter 40: Remnants and Loot

“... Hh-!?”

My eyes fling open as I jump awake.

“T-the boss is!!”

“Good morning, Momokawa-kun”

Instead of the heinous red Orthrus, the one sitting in front of me with a smile was the bright and cheerful Futaba-san. The enemy seemed to be gone, and missing too.

“Eh, Ah... Morning”

This place doesn't look like the boss room so much. More like, isn't this just a plain old fairy square?

As soon as I realized that, I decided to ask Futaba-san what happened.

“By the time I got out of that wall of fire, Hirano-kun and Nishiyama-san, they were both, the boss had... But it looked weakened, so I could kill it alone”

So it comes back to her Berserker strength I see. If I were to end up being the last one standing, it'd be game over right there.

Anyway, the fact is that Futaba-san skillfully overcame the boss, and taking me, who was half-dead from friendly fire, she got out from the boss room, and safely arrived to the next dungeon area that starts off with this fairy square.

Really, I've been relying on her from start to finish.

“So that's what happened... Sorry Futaba-san”

“Why are you apologizing, Momokawa-kun?”

“Cause I was really, really useless back there... No, it's worse than that. Because of me, our plan turned into a mess, and I even got myself done in by the boss”

If I had chosen not to retreat, but boldly face the battle, if only I did that, maybe Hirano-kun and Nishiyama-san, maybe at least one of them would still

be here now.

“Momokawa-kun, you didn’t do anything wrong at all! It’s because, those two, they only—”

“No look, I’m the one who tried to run away off the bat, that’s just fact. Them losing trust in me right then and there was inevitable.”

“But, Nishiyama-san, she shot you! I, I get it you know. Her and the boss riddled with cuts, that was obviously from your Pain Return”

Exactly. In a state of being bitten down and stuck still by the boss, Nishiyama-san’s Aer Blast went straight for the critical hit. Like trying to solve a hostage situation by killing both felon and hostage.

“That’s my, just deserts, right...”

Honestly, from Hirano-kun egging her on, to Nishiyama-san herself actually having shot me, I can’t really let those pass with a little grumbling. Like, what the eff, the hell’s wrong with you, go to hell.

But, I just can’t come out and say it. It’s not about spitting on their graves or anything, but like, it’s cause I’m the one who got everyone out of sync in the first place... so it really was, me getting what was coming. I shouldn’t have panicked, and done better.

“It’s not your fault! Momokawa-kun, you have not one bit of blame in this!!”

“Thanks, just you saying that... No, just you not abandoning me, and even saving me from there, Futaba-san, that’s more than enough”

This useless Shaman, he was one foot in the grave already, it would’ve been fine to leave him behind as another stain in the boss room. And that important health potion, he even got that used up on him too. Unbelievable, such a waste.
[1]

(TN: If you get it, then fine. This paragraph is just him being pessimistic in the 3rd person(?))

Healing me from that miserable state, and so perfectly at that... That potion is so much of a cheat item, my ointments seem like a joke. You should obviously hold on to something like that to use on a fighter like Futaba-san.

“I’d never, ever betray you. I won’t run anymore either. I swore, that I’d protect Momokawa-kun!”

Thanks. Really, my sincerest thanks, Futaba-san. With your trust in me, I’m so happy I could cry. If our genders were switched, I’d be head over heels harder than a cliché RomCom heroine.

“Yeah, me too, I won’t let you down”

I’ll make next time work. Hirano-kun and Nishiyama-san, they could’ve been real allies with us.

Trust. That’s right, trust is important. I still have a will to try and trust someone else.

Betrayed all too easily by Masaru, someone who’s supposedly my friend. Then because of those last two people, I was left half dead. But then there’s Futaba-san, she’s someone who saved me. So it’s still too early, too early to give up on trusting others.

No, us human beings, in the first place, we aren’t supposed to live in extremes. It’s when we can guarantee our individual safety, procure adequate food and clothing, it’s only then that we can begin to reason, we can become social creatures abiding by the rules of society.

That being the case, going around fighting monsters in life or death scenarios every single day is just plain wrong. Gathering allies, building our forces... It doesn’t have to be perfect, but in an environment where we can actually relax, that’s when we can be our best. Plus, we’re still mentally immature kids, just highschoolers. So this applies to us all the more.

“Momokawa-kun... Ah, that’s right, I brought back their things, let’s see if there’s anything we can use”

“Yeah, yup, let’s”

She even managed to get those, I thought in admiration while we started sorting through the items of the two departed.

The thought of those two becoming sacrifices for our survival doesn’t well up the slightest hint of crying or grieving in me. Maybe, I’m already too far off the

deep end from this whole dungeon lifestyle thing we've been doing. Just look, right now, I'm calmly looking through a couple of dead classmates' bags, objectively searching for useful things we can pilfer.

"... Momokawa-kun you're, crying?"

"Eh... Ahh, yeah, crying, kinda, maybe"

What's this "kinda maybe" BS. Aren't you're eyes creating these nice little waterfalls right now?

Ahh, I'm glad. Not yet, I haven't lost all my humanity yet.

Sorry, sorry Hirano-kun, Nishiyama-san. I still can't like you guys for what you did, but it's not like I think it's good that you died. I'm sure we could've, should've gotten along better... sorry, I'm so sorry.

I quietly cried, as my body trembled under the weight of their sacrifice.

I had made a re-apprehension of my conscience, but that aside, we really needed to sort out our things.

First, and this is a real treasure this, we have to consider how to use Hirano-kun's good quality sword.

"Here, it's for you, Momokawa-kun!"

"No see here, it obviously gotta be your sub-weapon"

She offered me the sword like she was handing over Valentine's chocolate with romantic intentions attached, but I deny it outright.[2]

(TN: Honmei as opposed to Giri/Friendship. This wasn't necessary right? Everyone and their dog has seen a Valentine's episode...)

"Eh... B-but, I'd feel bad getting something this good"

"Futaba-san, you're fighting in the frontlines where it's most dangerous, so we'll have to equip you with the best of the best. And I don't think that Goma battle axe has much of a life-expectancy."

"But you too, for the just in case, I strongly think you need better weapons too Momokawa-kun"

"I'm not saying I disagree... but unfortunately, my thin arms can't really swing

around a sword that size, you see”

It’s the case of the weapon being too high level to equip. I can’t even imagine myself elegantly cutting down an attacking monster with this sword.

“Since I can’t make any use of it, you’re the only one I can count on for this”

“S-so you’re saying... I got it. I, I’ll make sure and kill all the enemies. I won’t let a single one get close to you, Momokawa-kun!”

What fervor. I’m guessing it’s because of her Berserker nature, even a girl like Futaba-san gets excited from attaining a good weapon.

That being settled, the best piece of loot smoothly went where it belonged, and now we only needed to distribute the rest of the stuff. But then, those two didn’t have that many high value items in the first place.

Even that miraculous health potion that saved me from the verge of death, Nishiyama-san only had one of those. Coming second best, there’s only a few of those clovers. We already have ointment A, so those aren’t especially important to us either.

That and there’s Nishiyama-san’s wand of wind magic. We tried it out even though we knew, but as expected, neither I nor Futaba-san could use it. I had the slightest hope of just maybe, but no matter how I prayed, I couldn’t get a breeze out. You should just get rid of useless goods. But the inner miser in me simply wouldn’t allow us to leave a genuine magic wand to gather dust...

“Now, do it, Futaba-san!”

“Eei!!”

Swinging her axe with magnificence the likes of the legendary Kintarou, she severs the wand. She cuts off only the green orb part that seems to be screaming, Look at me, I’m a real powerhouse here! Futaba-san’s strike is powerful yet precise, cleanly splitting the orb from the rest of the wand, and so we easily obtained that beautiful green centerpiece.[3]

(TN: This Kintarou.)

I’ll just hoped it’ll comes handy at some point, and stuffed it deep in my bag.

“I don’t know if they’ll be useful, but I took these fangs from the boss”

Thanks to Futaba-san acting like a vet player in those games where you go around collecting monster parts, we have obtained Orthrus Fangs x 2. These are our item drops. Not really.

These fangs felt too small to be knives in my hands, but they're still thicker and longer than my thumb. An impressive pair of teeth you'd think belongs to a dinosaur.

"You know, if you hit these on something hard, sparks come out. It's just like flint"

"Woah, it really does, this is great!"

When I tried knocking one on the edge of the fountain, quite a bit of sparks flew out. This amount is way too much to be caused by mere friction.

Since the Orthrus could blow out fire, maybe the fangs have magical properties too. Or maybe it uses flammable gases with wind magic, with the fangs are there for igniting the whole thing.

"So, are they useful?"

"We can't make it into a flamethrower, but as a fire-starter, it's perfect. We do have the lighter, but the fluid won't last forever right"

The lighter we've been using was obtained from Takashima-kun from the baseball club who's secretly happened to be a smoker. It's thanks to this that we got to enjoy some delicious snake meat.

And since we conveniently happen to have two of these fangs, me and Futaba-san will carry one each.

"Oh you're right, fufu, I'm glad then"

"So remember that we know monster's can have naturally useful materials other than cores inside them. Let's try and collect those too from now on"

Sure, she nodded with a smile and delight. Futaba-san sure is a great person to work with. Not a hint of finding my proposed dirty-work, of literally salvaging through blood and entrails, a pain in the ass or something.

But I shouldn't just these leave things to others. I'll start learning and try help out a bit. Next time we see a monster fitting the criteria, let's get her to teach

me.

“Ah, Momokawa-kun, there’s this too”

Finally, Futaba-san rummages a bit through her pocket and offers me the item she retrieves. So this second present from her, what ever shall it b—

“Ah! That’s, Hirano-kun’s G-Shock!?”

Black strap with a silver body, it’s a wristwatch with an analog display. I recognized that familiar design instantly.

“You looked like you wanted one, a watch”

“Ah, yeah, since it’s so convenient and all...”

Don’t tell me, was I really that obvious? I never thought I was a person with too many material desires though... gotta stop that habit.

“So I can really have this?”

“Of course!”

Futaba-san seems to declare, but I’m kinda worried what Hirano-kun would say. I could just end it with, dead men don’t talk... but really, I’m not so much a romanticist as to ignore useful items for sentimental reasons.

It wasn’t even a full day with them. We spent a truly short time together but still, as a comrade, I’ll make full use of these remnants they left behind in the dungeon hereafter.

“Thanks”

And with that, we’re all set. We’ll rest in this fairy square a bit longer, then, once again, dive into the unknowns of the dungeon.

Chapter 41: Poison Bog

“Ah-...Ruinhilde-sama”

“Mine devotee, Momokawa Kotarou. It doth be slight, but I see thou hast bolstered thine powers of the Shaman”

“T-thank... you...”

Before I noticed, I was once more standing accompanied by grim reaper-looking God of Curse.

I had decided to nap a bit before we headed out, so I guess I’m being summoned to this wonderful God area in that span. Seriously, I just can’t get used to this. I was let off without any pain last time, but you never know when that’ll change. Like really, isn’t there a better a better way to do this?

“Strength of emotion, of hope, that doth be what feeds and nurtures thine curse. Howe’er, with solely emotions, meaning found ist not”

“Erm... As in, the results will be botched if I don’t actually defeat monsters and show concrete progress, something like that, right?”

“Indeed”

As if satisfied with that reply, the bizarre skull-only head nods in approval.

Well, it is logical to think that the experience points won’t enter unless you actually kill something. Stuff like getting all pumped up in a fight with a big boss like, “I’ll never lose to you! UoOOOo!!”, and then, miraculously getting a new power, finally to end with an epic victory; that kind of thing is only acceptable in cheap RPG scenarios with half-assed cut scenes.

In other words, no matter how much I long for some attack moves, I’ll be getting zilch if I can’t show the results God is satisfied with. But what if, there’s no offensive curses in the first place. Just accept it and take up a sword or something. What if that kind of heartless reality is awaiting me?

No way that’s right, right? Ruinhilde-sama’s curses have attack oriented skills right?

“Very well, let us grant it, this power to injure another, thou so wishes for”

“Eh, you’re kidding!?”

No wait, right then, wasn’t he legit reading my mind? Don’t tell me, all those monologues are being transmitted to you? M-my apologies, I know my thoughts may seem incredibly rude sometimes, but please, these things aren’t in my control!

“All is fine. Thou hast earned, shown results enough, to garner this curse. It is simply that”

“Whoaa, t-thank you very much!”

Being straight-cut praised makes me kinda, really happy. I’m not what you call the getting praised type. My parents are also pretty laissez-faire, not going around congratulating their kid for any and all things, and due to that kind of home education, not being praised is my norm. My thought pattern works with the motto: it’s fine as long as they’re not mad.

To sum up, I’m just not used to praise. Too much pampering and I’ll get cocky, I kind of worry if that could happen.

“Uhm, but I don’t remember doing very much in the last boss fight so... is it really alright?”

“The curse’s might, relateth to the depth of one’s own karma. Those that resent with misguided hate simply cannot fathom the abyss that is the curse”

If I’m getting this right, he must be talking about how I didn’t begrudge Hirano-kun and Nishiyama-san. Someone who gets all boiled up, and starts raging towards people for any little thing won’t be competent as a Shaman, is what he’s saying.

But then, what’s supposed to be the right timing I need to be angry at? In any case, I don’t feel anything other than wanting absolute revenge against Higuchi though.

“A great curse, cometh at the end of great composure and spirit— Now, Momokawa Kotarou, presenteth thine hands”

“Y-yes...”

Ah, I guess it's time. Time for getting a new curse. Will it hurt? It won't right? My thoughts were increasingly getting concentrated on that question rather than what offensive type curse I'd be getting.

"Know that a Shaman is solely in spirit not, but as well in flesh, he is curse. Now bear that sigil of curse"

Taking my outstretched right hand, on the back of it, Ruinhilde-sama's chalk-white, knife-like, bone finger stabb—

"GyaaaAAAAAAAAAaa!!"

He cut me! He's really cutting, no, he's gouging at it!?

God's fingertip was mercilessly scraping against the insides, the meat in my hand, making the wound a larger hole.

"That indeed is, the very first step to becoming a Shaman"

Ahh, fuck, it was pain this time huh!

Ruinhilde-sama's important words went in my right ear, and out my left. Screaming to throat-shattering levels, I fell unconscious at some point doing God's trial, and somehow escaped that hell.

"...Guess, we should get going"

"Sure!"

After replenishing in herb, and finishing the laundry + repair of our clothing, we re-entered the old dungeon. Futaba-san looks cheerful and at ease, but I just finished up a nightmarish level up ritual so I can't really say the same for myself.

But I can't go showing off too much of a pitiful state. I'll try not to.

"This area seems, kinda like the first one?"

"Yes, but... it's somehow dark, gives off a bad aura too"

We've been walking on a stone passage and weren't seeing where it ended. There's the usual light panels spotted around on the ceiling, and to me, it looked dark as ever... But Futaba-san said "a bad aura", so there has to be something. Well, it's not like she has any Berserker skills like enhanced instincts

or a sixth sense of something.

“Gotta be careful then, there could be traps”

“But they said you can’t find any of the traps here unless you’re a Thief”

Right, from what we know, unless your vocation happens to be Thief, you’d be hard pressed trying to discover any traps or treasure chests. Meaning, it’s no use without the appropriate skills.

Or more like, if us normal highschoolers could find them without any of these special skill, I’d seriously doubt the trap setters I.Q. No well, there’s traps set by Goma living in the dungeon, and we fell into one of those too... Though I think we can somehow manage with something of that level. It’s not like I’ll fall for something so obvious over and over, I won’t okay!?[1]

(TN: Said in fluent Tsundere-speak.)

“Still, we should never let our guard down in this place”

“Ah, Momokawa-kun, stop there”

At the moment the narrow passage came to an opening, Futaba-san briskly stops. And I was dangerously close to crashing into that large behind in front of me. Talk about a close call, I’d like to praise myself, but also dismay a bit.

Futaba-san, not having a clue as to my internal disharmony, attempts to peer into the end of the passage with a serious expression. From that action, it’s obvious there’s something there. I regained my calm, and cautiously, also peeked in.

“Uaah, aren’t those like... Zombies?”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought too”

With a wide floor and high ceiling, it was a familiar tunnel-like large passage where, there two human shaped creatures we’re distinctly visible. Like a pair of adult and child, they had a clear difference in height as well.

Additionally, both their bodies had become rotten black with large portions of skin peeled off revealing the fibers of meat within. In parts of the arm or around the ribs, even the meat was gone and their white bones were peeking out.

As for clothing, both individuals only had a a dirty rag around their waist. Wandering around like that, going “Ooo” in a low voice, I really can’t imagine them as anything other than zombies.

“... The smaller one’s a Goma”

“And the bigger... I wonder, it doesn’t look like a normal human”

The smaller Zombie, looking at its size and build, it unmistakably share’s roots with one of those gluttonous devils that have since descended into the realm smallfry thanks to Futaba-san. But as for the bigger one, it’s all tall and lanky, its overall outline is clearly different from any Goma I know. Bigger, meaning it’s bigger lined up with other Goma. It’s actually around 170 cm (5’7”) I guess. Taller than me, but not so much reaching Futaba-san.

So at a glance, you’d think it’s an adult man on the thinner side... but that skin, it’s like it became closer to human but retained that colored so characteristically reminiscent of Goma. Perhaps it’s, an evolved form?

“I don’t think they will be tougher than Skeletons”

Futaba-san announces their imminent defeat. Seriously this girl, she’s grown so strong, so courageous since back when I met her in the dungeon, it’s like she’s a different person entirely. If we had a status attribute called manliness, she’d already have 10 fold the number I would.

“If those Zombies are really as weak as Skeletons, I want to test out my new curse”

“Alright, I’ll take out the bigger one then”

That’d help. It’s hard to think the Goma got stronger because it became a Zombie. There’s the supposed setting that a Zombie’s brain has its limiter removed and it can call on 100% of its speed, power, yada yada, But if that we’re true, I’d expect it to apply to all undead monsters, and those Skeletons would’ve been much stronger in that case.

It’s ok. I can defeat this.

Futaba-san and I left the passage and entered the tunnel.

“Ei!”

First strike goes to Futaba-san. An unimaginable blunt force that can pulverize a Skeleton's skull, it's her stone throw.

The small stone flies in a smooth, straight line making a whistle, and slams a direct hit on the bigger Zombie's chest. With a short scream-like moan, the Zombie falls.

"UboaAAAA!"

On the other hand, the Goma Zombie's reaction was sharp. Makes you think as if it already noticed us when we entered. When its friend was done being shot, it had already started running towards us.

"Uaah, it's the damn running type!"

I let out a complaint on impulse. Fuck this, zombies should just be zombie-like and slowly stalk towards you. The hell are you doing making a sprint with perfect arm swings, you bastard!

Well, the fact that I can actually see it running means that the brain limiter thing is still on and it hasn't become super strengthened, so that's some relief. One thing to note though, its power looks like it hasn't changed since it was alive.

"Hmph!"

And since it hasn't changed, there's no way it'll last against Futaba-san's attack. With one swing of her axe, the Goma Zombie was quickly divided in two from its abdomen, and releasing entrails and dirty black blood, it was reduced to waste lying on the passage.

"Ah, sorry Momokawa-kun! It was coming pretty fast so I kinda..."

Those instinctive and decisive methods make Futaba-san a splendid Berserker if you ask me.

"No that's fine. Since we learned that you can beat them with little damage"

The Goma Zombie's corpse doesn't even twitch. Kinda thought it'd keep moving until the head was gone, and I've also heard of types that keep going without a head too, but those cases don't seem to apply here.

"Plus, looks like that one still needs more work"

Further ahead, the other Zombie was slowly rising up. It's chest area looks caved in, but nonetheless, it looks lively enough to start dashing anytime.

"Futaba-san, stand a little behind me please"

She nods, and quickly falls back. But her grip on the axe hasn't loosened a bit. She's alert and will come to my aid if need be. How reliable.

"Well then, I'll be trying out my long awaited attack curse now, Ruinhilde-sama—"

I gently raise my right arm, and properly recite the aria.

"On trials not of will. On fate not of honor. On destiny of such aversion, I will carve my own path — Black Bloodline"

A pattern that looked as if painted in fresh blood appeared on the back of my outstretched right hand. A magic circle, or rather, it looked more like a big eye. This is probably what Ruinhilde-sama was grinding away at with his sharp finger on the insides of my hand, a genuine crest of God. No, I guess it's a curse in this case.

This mark of curse also extended to my palm. On this side, its was a simple X-mark. As I turned my palm and it faced the ground, a single drop of blood fell from the x-mark.

With that, the prep-work for the curse is done.

"Putrefy, in the depths of vile red— Rotten Bog[2]"

(TN: 腐り沼 — Kusari Numa — Rotten Bog)

One drop of Black Bloodline descended from my hand. And the moment that single bead of blood stained the ground, it spread out along with vigorous bubbling. Looked as if, the ground itself was bleeding out.

This is in fact, just how my first offensive curse, the Rotten Bog, is supposed to work. With my blood as the epicenter, a poisonous pool, similar to Hell's lake of fire, is created. It has a certain range, and a somewhat arbitrary shape and radius. The width and toxicity seems to be determined by the density and amount of my blood used. Incidentally, my blood isn't currently that of a normal human being, but has a kind of special attribution.

Black Bloodline Blood that may be blessing or curse. No matter one's lineage, the fact that blood is an essence of life is absolute. Body, curse, magic, faith— its effect manifests in a myriad of matters.[3]

=====

|Black Bloodline| |Blood that may be blessing or curse. No matter one's lineage, the fact that blood is an essence of life is absolute. Body, curse, magic, faith— its effect manifests in a myriad of matters.[/tn]|

=====

(TN: 黒の血脈 — Kuro no Kechimyaku — Black Bloodline (repeating from ch29)... it's like a sharingan?)

That's about it for the description in my head for Black Bloodline. Kinda like, it says bloodline, and I don't really have any special origin story, but this curse will help out with some stuff, is the feeling.

Just letting it out there, I have a pair of completely normal, Japanese parents living in an ordinary Japanese household, no impressive ancestry whatsoever. Nothing like, in fact, the Momokawa house has been handing down this special technique for generations, or any of that bs.

But it's clear that with this Black Bloodline, my blood has the ability to strengthen the Rotten Bog. It's just a gut feeling, but if I used plain old blood to make the bog, I have a feeling I wouldn't get something this big or toxic.

Which means, this is a lucky combination of skills I got as a result of piling on experience as a Shaman.

“Yeah Futaba-san, get back a bit more!”

The dark crimson pool of blood kept expanding in the passage. It gained a radius of 2 meters right in front of me. More that big enough to catch a dumb Zombie running in a straight line.

Futaba-san and I stand a bit away from the Rotten Bog so we can counter it in case it tries passing over with a big jump, and we wait for the rushing Zombie.

“BuoOOAAAAA!!”

With a mad shriek, the Zombie steps foot into the swamp of deadly poison—

Rotten Bog In but a single step, the meat melts off, rotting into the toxic liquid.[4]

=====

|Rotten Bog| |In but a single step, the meat melts off, rotting into the toxic liquid.[/tn]|

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(TN: 腐り沼 — Kusari Numa — Rotten Bog... it’s like a portal, but there’s no other side)

That description being right on the money, starting from its first step inside, sizzling sounds came from the Zombie’s feet as parts began melting off.

“Buah! GhoOOAAAAA!!”

And then it fell down. Since the soles of its feet melted, it slipped smoothly, and splashed into the ground with the full momentum of its previous rush. With no defenses of speak of, the Zombie flopped head first into the poison bog.

It was a scene you could maybe find in those gag prank shows on TV, falling down with a dumb expression and the works, but me and Futaba-san couldn’t really point and laugh at the end result.

“Urk, Uaaah...”

Seeing that kind of gruesome melting damage from my own curse, I inadvertently let out a voice of aversion.

Getting its body smeared in the poison, or more like, in the potent acid-like liquid, a loud fizz released from all over the Zombie along with smoke tinged in red.

Writhing in agony, the Zombie attempted to get up... only to find its hand on the ground had gone. Then I saw its wrist had just plopped off, then came its elbow, then the knee.

“Oo...AAa...”

Losing any and all limbs to struggle with, what remained was only the pitifully frothing head and trunk. And in no time, the head crumbled away, lastly leaving the Zombie's lone back, slowly descending into the acid. Its everything returning to nothing.

"Oh... I did it"

"You did it! That's great Momokawa-kun, you beat the Zombie by yourself!"

As I was reflecting on whether this kind of win was truly valid, Futaba-san raised her voice in explosive cheers.

Reading the description, I knew it'd end this way. I knew, but looking at the enemy dying so gruesomely... I can't really feel like jumping in joy. Hoping for something a bit cooler in terms of killing, is probably too much to ask for.

Aaaanyway, this marks my first real victory since becoming a Shaman. It wasn't a series of lucky events like with the Armor Bear, nor was it getting saved by Futaba-san like in the Goma trap incident. It was simply, purely me achieving a win with my powers as a Shaman. One mere Zombie. But a Zombie nonetheless.

So I'll own it. No matter how awful, how grotesque it looks, a win is a win.

"E-ehehe... Thanks"

With somewhat of a weird laugh and awkward bashful expression, I cheer for me as well along with the brightly smiling Futaba-san for my first ever victory.

[1] Said in fluent Tsundere-speak.

[2] 腐り沼 — Kusari Numa — Rotten Bog

[3] 黒の血脈 — Kuro no Kechimyaku — Black Bloodline (repeating from ch29)... it's like a sharingan?

[4] 腐り沼 — Kusari Numa — Rotten Bog... it's like a portal, but there's no other side

Chapter 42: Mandragora

Looks like this area only has Zombies and Skeletons. The Skeletons are the usual sluggish and slow-reacting type, their attacks being monotone like some badly programmed A.I., they're your average mob monsters. Zombies consist of the Small Zombies, and the more human-like Adult Zombies. Though unlike Skeletons they don't carry weapons, Zombies can detect us and as a result, start shrieking and rushing at us, which is a pain.

When encountered at corners, they'd instantly go into battle mode and come at us, so it's quite nerve wracking. But Futaba-san has the guts and ability to calmly cut down those Zombies no matter what starting distance. Up until now, no matter what surprises came our way, she could always get the upper hand.

It's not like we usually can't see them coming, so Zombies aren't that big a deal. If we see them without them noticing, I can set up my Rotten Bog in advance, and Futaba-san can get their attention with her stones, fishing them out easily.

If there aren't many, we can just wait behind the bog and the Zombies will jump in and melt on their own. If there's more than 5 or so, some of them can bridge across stepping on others that are still melting. Most of the time when that happens, the surviving numbers aren't much and they fall prey to Futaba-san's axe.

When there's still more, I use Blackhair Bind for support, and we can get a slightly bigger safety margin. Of course, Zombies aren't like that Orthrus, they can't breathe fire nor do they have any sharp nails or bladed weapons. They can't easily escape my blackhair's grasp.

Well, they're usually moving so fast, sometime's the ankle would just tear off from the momentum. So when I do bind them, I make sure to get both legs or the trunk.

Like that, we arrived to at the end of the tunnel at a large clearing which I could describe as a graveyard forest. Once there, we beat a fairly large horde of them safe and sound, and pretty easily to boot.

“Fuuh, finally. All cleaned up, Momokawa-kun”

“They’re easy to beat, but it sure is a lot of effort”

In games, you certainly have strategies where you lure in small parts of a group of mobs towards you and whittle down their numbers, but that gets boring real fast. Most of the time you’re just waiting to get to a high enough level or chance upon a good weapon to deal with them all at once. But that’s a feeling strictly in games.

“I feel like I could take on around this much myself”

“If there’s an easier way, we should just use that. Safety first right? Taking risks should be only when there’s a boss and you don’t have much choice.”

Like really, this isn’t a game, but real life, with that life on a fine line. Safety is like the best luxury you can get. It may take more time, more effort even, but I’ll happily put in the work for that option.

The only downside: we can expect no cores from Skeletons as a given, but none at all from any Zombies either.

“Let’s get going. There could be more Zombies behind the trees so stay alert”

From the tunnel, it looked like the Zombies were cleared out, so we stepped into the graveyard forest.

I say graveyard, but basically, it’s a forested dome where the ground has tree branches sticking out like grave markers. Though they can look like normal graves at a glance, they may as well be something completely different.

All of these branches show signs of being broken, so it’s clear that they didn’t grow naturally, and were put there by something else. Maybe the Goma decided to make this place their gravesite, or maybe there’s a monster that likes to break off branches and stick them into the ground. I wouldn’t know.

But yeah, I can’t associate this scene with anything other than a graveyard. Plus, I don’t know whether they’re trying to save on power or just broken, but the light panels on the ceiling here are especially dim here. If someone’s trying to set the mood or something, please stop.

“... Hm”

We were walking according to the magic compass while being vigilant of our surroundings, but something caught my eye all of a sudden.

“Futaba-san, wait a bit”

There’s no, what’s wrong, or any question of the sort. With a simple, “Yeah” of confirmation, she got into position as lookout and guard. I feel like Futaba-san’s quality as a bodyguard rose at some point without me noticing.

“Hmm”

I’ll leave my impression of Futaba-san aside for now, and concentrate on that thing that caught my attention. Growing along the base of one of the thicker grave markers, it was a bundle emerald green grass. It may seem like ordinary weeds at a cursory glance. But a vividly poisonous purple from its root portion, something like a fruit, was peeking out from the ground. My guess would be that something like a carrot is buried in there.

Well then, since I’m curious, I’ll just investigate this mysterious magenta with my Intuition Pharmacy—

“A plant that resembles monsters, and has ominous human shaped roots. Against predators, or any who try to pull it out, it resists with a shrill noise released via a form of telepathy. Since ages past, it has been used for miracle drugs, wonder cures, and even deadly poisons. Due to its unique ecology, it is said to have a profound effect on the human psyche.”

Intuition Pharmacy’s usual casual explanation became all legit all of a sudden. What’s up, ya look it up on Wikipedia or something?

Anyway, aside from just how that whimsical skill works, a single name popped into my head from that description just now.

“So basically, it’s a Mandragora right?”

“Ah, that, I’ve heard of it”

Yeah, the name itself is pretty famous after all. It’s a familiar ingredient item in games, and it’s a frequent staple in all sorts of fantasy media.

It usually goes something like: it’s got a human shaped root, and starts screaming when pulled out, granting death to whoever shall hear. There’s also

the mandrake. The name being similar, it's the plant that became the basis of the legend. But from the description, looks like it's not the Mangradora we know from Earth, and it's somewhat different from the ones in fantasy stories too. This should be a similar, but different plant peculiar to this otherworld.

"Let's try pulling it out"

"Eh, doesn't that kill you!?"

"It didn't say instant death, so we should be fine?"

It supposedly resists via telepathy, an amazingly fantasy behavior. I'm somewhat curious as to what that is. And naturally, as a Shaman, I simply can't let go of excellent material like this that may as well become miracle meds.

"You're sure? Really sure about this, right? If it looks bad, let it go right away alright!"

Leaving be Futaba-san, who's transformed into a model overprotective mother, I grab onto the Mandoradora's leaves with expanding curiosity.

"Eii!"

Yelling out, I pull hard. And in doing, a shrill bird's cry, or like a very high-pitched human voice rang out in my head.

I see, so this is that shrill telepathic noise. Hmm, it's not much. Nails scratching on a blackboard or shattering glass would be more painful I guess. Also, isn't this a little too low volume?

"Ah, it's out"

In no time, it easily popped out.

"Momokawa-kun, you're alive right!?"

"Ah, yup, no, it wasn't bad at all"

With a satisfied expression, I dangle the harvested Mandragora in front of Futaba-san. Like, look at the fruit of my labour, look at it.

Taking a good look, it does kind of look human-ish. The split tip obviously being the legs. There was that sexy radish trend right? It's pretty much that.[1]

(TN: Yes, radish the root vegetable.)

But with what seemed to be eyes and a mouth, it's head area had round, concaved parts, and with its full-on purple skin, it has an overall feel that you wouldn't want to eat it at all. Though yeah, I have a feeling I can make something really good from this.

"Futaba-san, you wanna give it a try? There's another one over there"

"Ehhh, it's really okay right?"

Easy peasy, no but still, after a bit more of that, in the end, Futaba-san pulled it out.

"Yeah, I got one!"

"Nice, how's the voice?"

"Nothing, I didn't hear a thing"

Told you, we were happy to be able to easily collect the Mandragora, but the situation suddenly changed.

The first one to notice was of course, Futaba-san, with her sharp senses or something that Berserkers seem to have.

"Something's there"

I quickly stuff the 2nd Mandragora into my bag, and get ready to run at a moment's notice.

"We'll retreat to the entrance. How is it?"

"Still clear, we're not completely surrounded yet... But I sense them from both sides"

Too bad I don't have the ability to sense presences like that. Looking left or right, I see only silent foliage.

With a quick glance back, there's the entrance from the tunnel to this clearing some 10 meters away.

"Momokawa-kun, run!"

It's damn right insane to run blindly when facing an unknown enemy and, though that may be a big concern, I fully trust in Futaba-san's decision-making ability. Her instinctive battle sense as a Berserker is tremendously reliable. My

little complaints can take a back seat anytime.

And the moment I started running just as instructed, with a loud rustling, the monsters made their appearance around us.

“Baubauu!”

It was a monster we hadn’t encountered before, making noisy dog-like barking sounds.

At a glance, they looked like one of those carnivorous dinosaurs I saw in an encyclopedia as a kid. Height being around that of a human, it was a bipedal lizard, with short forelimbs that should be the arms, and a long tail. It was grey like cinderblock, and on its back I could see densely packed scales with a metallic glimmer.

But its most peculiar, or more like, bizarre aspect would be its disproportionately big head. It looked like a slightly angular cube. Splitting in jagged lines from the middle peeked its wide maw. Matching its similarity to dogs, it had a long tongue sticking out from that mouth, dribbling foul spit.

Glaring with its beady red eyes, it aimed for us looking expressly famished.

“It’s a Goar!”[2]

(TN: You... might disagree with the translation of コア — Goa — Goar. In Kuro no Maou, it’s kinda established how it should be Gore (with all the translators using that), but tbh, I just don’t like it. Goa, I believe, is the dinosaur roar sound effect, so it makes sense to me to tl it as Goar, resembling Roar. If anyone’s got a good argument for Gore, or a better TL, I’d be glad to hear it. (joke) Also, “baubau!” sounds so boring lol, so I imagine it as Sam L Jackson saying “Baubau muhfugga, I’m here to fug u up!”)

Of course, it’s the first time I’ve seen one, but I knew the name. We checked for mail in the note circle before heading out, so we know some info on this monster.

Goars are a species of earth dragon that are small in size and form packs (I’m guessing earth dragons are monsters that look like dinosaurs). They’re omnivorous but prefer meat, usually scavenging on dead creatures, they will eagerly attack prey that seem weak enough to hunt. An aggressive, and vicious

monster.

They have no magic, but along with the sheer strength and quick-footedness boasted by all members of the earth dragon family, it uses its oversized jaws to reap its prey.

These dangerous Goars had appeared, and in a pack of five no less. There could be even more hiding in the bushes. Anyway, there's a lot. And I can't think of a way we can take them on with just us two.

This, may be a bit bad.

"Hmph!!"

Futaba-san lets out a breath of energy. Looking there, the Goar coming at her was blown away. That must be the counter-attacking ability of the Knight's skill #2, Repel.

The attacking Goar not only got repelled away, but took a direct blow from the axe as well. It's belly being white and scaleless, easily split apart, spilling dark red blood and entrails.

One of them being done in with such nimble movements and ease however, wasn't enough to caution its friends to give up.

"Futaba-san!"

"I'm fine, you get back behind the bog, Momokawa-kun"

By the time the next few Goars seiged us from the front, left, and right, I had somehow made it to the entrance by running full force.

Over there was the Rotten Bog we had made to safely dispose of the horde of Zombies previously, spread end to end across the entrance as much as possible. This curse won't go disappearing on its own. Once made, it stays. However, like paint drying, it reacts to the air, and would eventually harden, loosing its toxicity, it'd become harmless dirt.

The one made there just now still hasn't dried up. Bubbling eerily, it seemed to be asking for new prey.

"Easy does it!"

I leap across the very edge so I don't fall in. Well, we've already confirmed that this poison won't work on me at all. So even if I made a mistake and stepped in, I won't become muddy waste.

But that only accounts for my own body, clothes and equipment being barred from the exception. And I do not need some fan service scene of only my clothes and things getting melted away by some erotic Slime digestion event. But seriously, losing our gear could become a fatal mistake.

Anyway, now this weak ass Shaman has made it to a safe location. Considering at their size, I can't imagine a Goar walking across the narrow portion of un-bogged area without dipping in.

— And curse the body!! Red Fever!!

Now that I'm properly position in rearguard, my role is only to support Futaba-san. First, I aim a curse at all the Goars. The effect is negligible as usual though. I can only pray it'll dull their movements a bit.

"Yahh!"

It's currently unknown whether my back-up was meaningful or otherwise, but Futaba-san slayed a Goar with a full swing nonetheless.

That's the 2nd one now. Futaba-san is holding position a little ways away from the entrance. Just close enough that I can use Blackhair Bind in a practical manner. At this rate, she can finish them off by herself no problem— Wait what? There's only 2 Goars around Futaba-san. Where's the other—

"Uwaah!?"

"BaoOOOOOoh!!"

Raising a piercing roar, one of the Goars were running towards the tunnel entrance. This fucker, it ignored Futaba-san and went for me instead!

"One got passed, Momokawa-kun! I'm coming right—"

"I'll handle it, you focus on the ones there!"

Futaba-san turning around and coming to my rescue at this point won't end well for either of us. The two Goars around her look like they're just waiting for a chance to pounce while maintaining distance. But more importantly, I can see

another three, four of them poking out their heads from deeper in the forest. If that whole pack starts attacking all at once, even Futaba-san can't hold out.

That's why, I gotta be able to take down at least one of these smallfries.

"What's wrong, come get some!"

I provoke it with a jittery voice from the other side of the pool. My enemy Goar was clearly wary of the Rotten Bog.

Tch, those brainless Zombies would be jumping into the dubious crimson mud no questions asked, but guess it won't go so well with a monster based on real live animals. Its instincts as a living creature must be alerting it against danger.

Huffing in rough breaths, for a while, it paced in front of the tunnel. Next, the Goar drew away. Did it give up, I wonder, but then it turned back towards here again, and started sprinting like no tomorrow.

Is it trying to cross over from the momentum— nope, I have a good idea about its ploy.

"O-oooh no you don't!!"

Just as I thought, the Goar was going to use its monster-strength legs to jump across. The bog is 4 meters in diameter. If a highschool boy can make 4 meters in long jump, for a monster like this it should be child's play. Which implies, with my Rotten Bog only this big, it'll only be a low-tier obstacle for a Goar.

Naturally, once it gets in, I have no hope of taking on this member of the Jurassic in a close combat situation. Relying on Pain Return won't lead to any kind of victory either.

"Fall into Heeeeeellll!!"

So I dropped it. Mid air, right around where it was above the middle of the bog, I pull the Goar down into hell.

Already lurking in the depths of the bogmud, a monster-like jet black tentacle flies out. I'm talking about the one and only, Blackhair Bind.

Getting to this point, I've been using it again, again, again, and again against Zombies, and even when Futaba-san didn't need any help at all, I kept practicing to the point of idiocy, and have become much more skilled at it since

the battle with the Orthrus. It's thicker, longer, and with a grip like never before.

“GyAoOAAAAAAAAA!!”

With fierce splashing, the Goar that was defenseless mid jump is yanked into the toxic swamp by the abyssal tentacle. The fizzling, liquifying sounds are much louder than when Zombies were plunged in. It's no wonder, its body is much bigger than a Zombie, so naturally there'd be more fizz.

“oOAAAAa! Bauh! BaAAAAa!!”

“Shut it, stay there... sink dammit!”

I further bind the writhing Goar with my blackhair tentacles. I call forth two more braids. One to hold down its tail rampaging on the mud, and the other to close its shrieking mouth filled with fangs. A total of 3 Blackhair Binds tied it down into the powerful dissolving bog.

How's that. When I realized that Blackhair Bind isn't affected by the Rotten Bog like my body, this was born as my most powerful killer combo.

“Bao! BAa... oo...”

Never able to fully free itself, my dangerous battle with the Goar came to an end. My curses aren't strong enough to hold down that kind of monster head on.

Looking at that Goar struggling so much, then completely losing its vitality and collapsing at the center of the poison bog, I was released from being on edge, and just stared vacantly for a bit.

“Haah... Haah... HA! Futaba-san, where's—!?”

Realizing that the fight wasn't over yet, I hastily look around with a start.

“Momokawa-kun, everything alright? The pack ran away already”

Looking around, there were the massacred corpses of seven Goars scattered about, and Futaba-san looking at me with a wholehearted expression of worry.

Just wow, while I was doing deadly 1v1, she'd taken care of seven of them like nothing... these combat specialized vocations are just amazing.

“Ah, yeah... no problem, alive mostly. Not a scratch in fact.”

“That’s great to hear. I’ll go look for cores then”

Looking at Futaba-san using her knife to fish out the Goar corpses so cheerfully, I kinda seriously thought, I can’t live without this girl anymore.

Futaba-san, I can’t thank you enough.

Chapter 43: Secret Harvest

So this happened. It was after clearing the graveyard forest, getting to the next fairy square, heading out from there, getting to another, similar Zombie filled area, and after finally reaching our 3rd fairy square.

I made up my mind and asked her.

“U-uhm, Futaba-san, you...”

“Eh, what is it?”

That smile turning towards me, you’d never think she’s been spending a so many days in a dreary dungeon. Her complexion is great, and her skin looks healthy. Such a wonderful smile makes it a bit hard to say. But I must, I shan’t delay it any longer, I’ll give it to her straight.

“Y-you erm... lost weight right?”

“EEehhhh!?”[1]

(TN: Pans to the sky... (lol))

Her eyes looked as if they’d pop out in surprise. And that reaction being so unbelievably forced, must be my imagination.

“I, I don’t see it at all! Me, losing weight, no way!”

“No no, you did, you slimmed down like, a ton!”

Even a good-for-nothing like me can declare wholeheartedly, that Futaba-san, has gotten visibly thinner.

I mean, I’d obviously notice right? That waist that looked like a barrel had somehow become hourglass shaped.

No, to be accurate, she’s still got more inches around there than the average girl, but due to that overwhelmingly massive bust and hip, the whole thing looks relatively squeezed in. Nonetheless, it’s clear as day that her figure went through a big change.

Plus, those thighs that looked like tree trunks had now gotten somewhat

defined. The form of her porcelain legs peeking out from her skirt looks toned, drawing a beautiful curve down.

Futaba-san now has in her possession, a body that is the envy of women, with sex appeal to make men stand fully in attention.

“Maybe, you’re right... ehe, ehehe...”

That shy, bashful thing must be an act. But no doubt she’s happy about it. She must’ve been concerned about her figure, even a little.

The current, thinner Futaba-san, with her round face that has much less fat around the edges, and with her big, round eyes, looks almost like one of those baby-faced idols. At this rate, she’ll be true idol-tier in no time.

“Yup, believe me, you’re seriously thinner. Must be all those harsh battles. And those power seeds too.”

“Yeah, I think so too... I’ve been getting more exercise than at school at least”

Going to town with a rabid pack of Goars with a single axe isn’t what I’d call merely exercise there, miss.

“The calorie consumption should be intense, but does everything feel alright? Any dizziness?”

“Nope, none at all. See, after becoming a Berserker, my whole body’s much lighter”

And in contrast, her attack damage has become tremendous. She can absolutely destroy a Goar’s bulky skull with one swing after all.

“That’s fine and all... but losing weight too fast and getting worn out will be bad too alright?”

“Eeh, no way, but I can’t get to normal size if I’m like this!”

That’s not the problem here.

Or more like, I myself couldn’t bear to see her get even thinner and become like those slim models you find anywhere. To lose that super-sized bust and hip that’s so alien to the Japanese populace, it’d be simply dreadful.

“Anyway, don’t force yourself. If anything feels weird, we’ll take a break right

away. Fairy square's are safe, and if it's a few snakes, I can go hunt them myself."

I'd be hard pressed to order her to Get fatter! or something, so I'll have her maintain what she has now.

Still, her waist has gone down so much, but the bust and hip seem unchanged. No, if my trained eye hasn't seen "any changes" then there's no doubt to be made. Do you realize just how solemnly I've been gazing at those treasures every single day? Secretly of course. What she doesn't know won't hurt anyone.

"Yeah, thank you, Momokawa-kun..."

Getting all bashful like that, Futaba-san is now no inferior than any pretty-girl (bishoujo) . With those massive jugs in her arsenal, it'd be fair to call her one of the big three beauties of class 2-7 alongside Souma Sakura and Reina A. Ayase. I'd even take the initiative to start her very own fan club and appoint myself chairman.

But yeah, seeing as I'm not getting light headed and my pulse hasn't risen drastically even when I'm with such a beautiful girl (the type I'm not used to even looking at), it must be that. Going through all this hell together must've made this bond. I could even call her a comrade and friend. At least, she is for me.

"Uh, Uhm, Momokawa-kun... I kind of, wanted to say something, too"

"Eh! What's that?"

Could it be, do I look tougher now too, is it that? Woah, this'll be great, it's perhaps time for me to finally upgrade into a manly man.

As if. I deny the thought looking at my twig arms that can't even break off a solid fairy walnut branch.

"First names, can we... go by first names?"

"Ah, sure, of course! We're a proper party now, so first names should be natural yeah"

It does seem a bit too distant to call someone you're entrusting your life to by

their last name. Plus, it's these little things that tend to deepen bonds between allies all the more, the psychological effect is no joke. In fact, I'd have asked for first names myself in due time, so it's a great suggestion.

"Sure, go for it"

"Wow, thanks so much, um, err... Kotarou-kun"

Oh man, what even, skipped a beat there. My nutbladder won't hold out.

Yeah, this is it. My, it's my first name being called like this by a girl, first time since birth. Like, those girls I played with in kindergarten only called me Momo-chan.

"Huh, Uhm... did I, say it wrong?"

"Uaahh!? No no, it was perfect!"

I got dazed for a bit from the shock. Noo, so embarrassing. I gotta get it together, or she'll take it the wrong way.

"And me too, first name okay?"

"Ah sure, les'see... Meiko"

"-!?"

Maybe it seemed too alien, Futaba-san reacts with a jolt.

Or more like, getting rid of the honorific was definitely the clincher. Futaba-san suddenly going all the way to Meiko is just rude. Like, what am I, her boyfriend?

"Ah, no, that was rude of me... Erm, got it, Mei-chan, how about that?"

"Y-yeah... that's fine, Kotarou-kun"

Man, first names, this is the life. Getting called like that by a girl, it's damn glorious. That damn Souma Yuuto, and all those other normies. You've been enjoying this happiness like drinking water every single day... Yeah, handsome guys are a privileged class after all.

"Thanks. I'll be counting on you then, Mei-chan"

We thus shook hands, symbolizing our deepened bond.

“...”

And, while that was certainly a refreshingly prickling interchange amongst highschoolers of the opposite sex, that evening, I did something so horrible to Futaba-san, it was as if I was trampling on every bit of her pure intentions.

The time was right around midnight. Thanks to the G-shock, we could now tell time very accurately. In the fairy square where light shines 24/7, I peered at the other side of the fountain to find that Mei-chan, formerly Futaba-san, has fallen fast asleep.

“N-no... I shouldn't do this”

Guilt, self-disgust, and the utter fear of what if she finds out, makes me loosen my resolve.

“No, I decided, I can't delay this anymore... It's now or never”

I re-harden my resolve. Since, this is a necessity.

“I'll make it, an actually useful mud doll”

My goal is to make a Vile Mud Doll I can send to battle. Last time, I tried making one the size of a Skeleton and collapsed from mana exhaustion. But this time, I know can do better.

With the recent Zombie area capturing, I've more or less realized that my curses are getting stronger. My most frequently used, Blackhair Bind, goes without saying, and as for my only attack option, that is Rotten Bog, I've gotten able to somewhat manipulate the shape and increase the acidity. If those two can get visibly stronger to such a degree, then Vile Mud Doll will too. Or at least, there's the possibility.

Eh, Red Fever? Who's that?

That aside, unlike a certain shitty curse #1 I know, Vile Mud Doll is a real trooper, I'm sure of it.

“I got all the materials I need”

I'm already done gathering the necessary items from the ones we've been collecting from battles. Bones from Skeletons, cores, scales, and skin from Goars, and threw in some Mandragora too. I knead mud from the fairy square

into a human shape to bury these in.

Next, I only needed my blood, yes, my new Black Bloodline flowing through my Shaman-y veins, if I use that then it should become a lot stronger than before.

But then, I had a sudden thought. If my blood isn't just a key to activate the curse, but also an ingredient itself... then won't other body fluids work too? I don't mean saliva. I'll be frank, I'm thinking semen.

It's not in a lewd meaning, but because in some stories with alchemy and homunculi, you often have stuff like mixing human and horse semen. I recalled it when we found the Mandragora. In this world, human sperm is likely to have some magic properties as well.

If it'll add some power to my curses, there's no waste trying. My measly spunk doesn't have any other use after all.

"O-oh kay, let's do it... Hirano-kun, I'll be gratefully using this alright"

In my hands is the infamous rubber balloon for adult use, in other terms, the condom. It was in a little corner of Hirano-kun's wallet that we now had in our possession.

That being there could mean one of two things. He didn't use it with Nishiyama-san. Or, after using them, there was only one left. Man, I'm so glad we didn't teleport in during any of their fun time. That would've been way beyond awkward.

It may be obvious, but this is my first time using such an adult item. But I happen to have more than enough instructional video knowledge on its application and use. I had fixedly reviewed such instruction every single day, so using it should be a no-brainer.

Though I never in my dreams imagined I'd be using one for a sad reason like collecting semen by myself for Shaman purposes. But then again, not using it and cumming all over the mud doll would be even more awful. Sure, I'm backed up from the full-time abstinence since the whole dungeon life started. I'd like some time to masturbate in peace if I can, please.

"... Hah"

And, I'm quickly done with the deed. I've achieved my goal, but my heart is currently overflowing with guilt.

"Futaba-san, I'm so sorry"

I'm so remorseful, I can't bear to call her by her first name right now.

Are you familiar with the term lookout? For those not in the know, you're doing great, but unfortunately, that isn't the case for me.[2]

(TN: 見抜き — Minuki — Lookout. There isn't an English term for it afaik, so I made this up. Something funny)

It's when you're playing MMOs and the sort, and you masturbate to female character avatars.

"Can I do some lookout here?"

Apparently they ask too. The darkness of MMOs runs chillingly deep.

I've never engaged in that sort of sinful gameplay, but I can't make fun of those gentlemen performing lookouts any longer. Like, doing it IRL is fundamentally different from doing it in front of your monitor. No actually, this has to be some sort of crime.

"Really, I'm really sorry..."

I never meant to go this far. I just, wanted to confirm if she was actually asleep.

But listen, hear me out ok? So on the opposite side of the fountain, there was this gravure-idol class beauty sleeping defenselessly with those huge tits overflowing with eros . We don't have any blankets or comforters supplied in the fairy square, meaning, we just lie down and sleep. In other words, this disasterously t h i c c girl was lying there, exposed to all of mother nature.

Naturally, she in no way could be described as naked. Futaba-san was using her gym clothes as sleepwear. There wasn't a speck of indecent exposure. There wasn't at all but, just look, her breasts and butt were like they're desperate to escape from those stuffy articles of clothing. Just how damn big do they have to get to stretch out clothes like that? Me being a guy can't even imagine, and I bet even girls would find it a bit hard to process.

Just that much was enough for me. Just that view entering my starved eyes was more than enough.

But then again, there was that time when Futaba-san almost tried to kill me. So in the back of my mind I'm imagining she'd forgive me saying, "Can't be helped nya~".

Just as I was daydreaming like that, she rolled in her sleep, facing my way. And like, I saw it. The front of her jacket was, how should I say, open. It's pretty warm in the fairy square, so wearing gym clothes over your normal clothes makes it a bit uncomfortable. Wearing just a T-shirt like I am feels just right.

And so, it must've been hot for her. Even when I, a perfectly valid male was right on the other side, Futaba-san had lowered the zipper of her jacket all the way to the middle.

Blitzing into my eyes, was the cleavage between those milky white breasts. A valley so profound, it rivals any mystical mountain.[3]

(TN: 深山幽谷 — Shinzan Yuukoku — Deep valley mountains, Wiki yeah...)

“—!?”

Carnal The intermediary of sex and magic. Love being itself a mode of curse, sexual
Crest intercourse is a ritual for—[4]

=====

|Carnal Crest| |The intermediary of sex and magic. Love being itself a mode of curse, sexual intercourse is a ritual for—[/tn]|

=====

(TN: 淫紋 — Inmon — Carnal Crest... I have no words. Well, I kinda do. I may change this when we get the full description.)

There was this curse description-like thing entering my head for a bit, but I had absolutely no mind to pay attention to something like that. What I mean is, if you're a man, you'll get it.[5]

(TN: I believe he's talking about this.)

“... Hah”

And there, we get back to the present. My big sigh comes not only from my emotional state, but also from a consequential loss of stamina. Didn't think I could let out twice in a row. I don't even need this much.

But I don't have any other use for this, and it's scary to think what'd happen if I secretly disposed of it at a corner here, so let's just use all of it for the mud doll.

That's right, I'm doing all this for my Vile Mud Doll. It's totally not because I wanted to relieve myself.

"Kay, I'm doing this, I'mma do this dammit"

Having rid myself of worldly desires, I now fully concentrate on the curse.

With complicated feelings, I smear on the final ingredient over the mud doll, and we're set.

"On trials not of will. On fate not of honor. On destiny of such aversion, I will carve my own path — Black Bloodline"

I can already make the blood without all that chanting, but at times like these, I imagine it's more effective if I do. So it's just in case.

"Rise from chaos, bind in foul blood, stand on stained earth—"

Falls a drop of blood. One, two drops. Have more, have as much as you want.

The drips penetrate when falling on the mud, and on the cloudy white, they mix to create a sickening color.

It's fine, sickening or ominous or whatever. Because this is a curse. Look as evil as you want, and get stronger.

"— Vile Mud Doll"

With that, I finish the aria. That time when I fainted, it was before I got to finish, so this means it worked. It's just, feels like I lost more energy than that double shot just now, so it must've drained a fair bit of mana.

Now, let's see how it went.

"Uaahh!"

The change was so drastic I let out my voice.

With the mud doll at the epicenter, thick liquid like in Rotten Bog was bubbling out. Can't be, I'm sure I got the right curse. The aria was perfect, and my mental image was spot-on too.

And looking closer, that muddy place wasn't crimson like Rotten Bog, but black as night. But I could also see blood red color peeking out here and there.

Is this, that so called Chaos?

As if answering my thoughts, the mud doll sinks into the boiling bog of chaos —

“Ah!”

I exclaimed, as the chaos bog started disappearing like it was only an illusion. After that, what was left, was but a small figure.

“Y-yes... It worked...”

It was a Skeleton, of jet-black bone. It had a black luster, a slight metallic polish that's perhaps from the Goar materials.

It's height was upto my hips, so the size of a child. The limbs were also short so it looked like a child's bones made into a Skeleton.

Well, looks don't matter. The crucial point is if it's strong.

“Try this”

I hand over the Goma made spear, that I've put to almost no use myself, to this black Skeleton of a Mud Doll.

“Ga, Gaga”

Acknowledged, it seems to say as it clicks its skeletal jaw-bones while receiving the spear. Taking stance, and a thrust. It's spear skill, even I can tell it's pretty awkward. I can't say it's good at all but—

“Good, very good! This much is enough for now”

But I'm now sure of it, of this Skeleton's talent. Just being able to swing a spear, it's proof that it now has human level strength. Plus, it's got good thrusting speed too. Looks like it's got around the same strength as me, maybe a bit less.

In sum, it's no longer that weak Mud Doll that had dismantled as soon as it got wet. That is to say, I can totally use this as a decoy or for kamikaze attacks. It's become a fairly convenient sacrificial pawn, and it adds to our numbers too. With its current size, I can have it do spear attacks, and next time, it's sure to do well distracting monsters. And when the time comes, it'll become my life-saving shield.

It doesn't have much fire power, but I got myself a good, obedient little soldier to use.

"Man am I glad that went well..."

With that feeling of relief, I drop to the ground as if some strings were cut. Both mana and stamina drained to the limit. My eyelids are so heavy, I'll just—

Chapter 44: Zombie Area Capture

“Kyaa! W-what is this!?”

With a scream from Futaba-san, I am relinquished from sleep.

“Mnah— W-what happened Futaba-san”

Still half asleep, I make the attempt to get up while rubbing my eyes.

“It’s terrible Kotarou-kun! There’s a monster in this fairy square! Also, first name please!”

“Eehh! Monster!? Where!”

That’s one hell of an emergency alright. Fairy squares are our only safe location. And if it came to be that some monsters could invade this space, we’d have to start setting up watch.

“Look, it’s over there! That black Skeleton!”

“Uaah, you’re right! What is that, a new type of Skeleton!?”

It had the figure of a child, with bones giving off a dark, metallic sheen, a jet-black Skeleton. At one corner of the square, it was single-mindedly swinging around a spear like a Knight focused on training.

“Ah, sorry Mei-chan, that’s one of mine, it’s a Mud Doll”

“Eh, it is?”

My head wasn’t working right just after waking up. Obviously, that over there is the Vile Mud Doll I made last night.

For now, I’ll go ahead and explain.

“Huh, so that’s how it is”

“Yeah, I was thinking it could work as a bit of support for you”

“Thankyou, Kotarou-kun”

The perfect smile she shoots back rivals any bishoujo. Man, dungeon-diets sure are impressive.

“So, what’d you name her?”

“Eh, name?”

“You didn’t?”

“Nope?”

Name, a name huh. Should be useful to have one I guess. If Mei-chan wants to give it orders, calling it by name would make it easier.

“Got it, let’s go with Rem”

It’s a mud doll, Golem, so Rem. Looks like a Skeleton though.[1]

(TN: Rem will hereby be pronounced female... if I’m not forced to make it male due to raws... In retrospect from this chapter, I feel a bit sorry. Also, in jap, L and R are kinda interchangeable.)

Basic naming done and over with, I will now start calling this nice and loyal mud doll Rem. When I mentally commanded come back, she stopped her training as if hearing me by telepathy, and began heading this way with a rattle of her bones.

Standing in front of us, her back, or rather, spine was straight, standing at attention, holding the spear in a perfect vertical. If I gave her some armor, she’d look just like one of those antique knight displays.

“She has great manners”

“Yup, she sure isn’t like those soul-less Skeletons and Zombies you find all over”

Speaking of which, it’s not like I told her to stand at attention, so this pattern of action must mean that she’s got at least some form of ego. There’s also the possibility that she comes preprogrammed with a certain level of independent activity.

“From now on, your name will be Rem”

“Nice to meet you, Rem-chan”

“Gaga”

Replying with a click of her jaws, Rem nodded no show understanding by

rigidly lowering her skull.

And like that, we got ourselves a new and improved Rem as a new team member(?), and began once more our venture into the dungeon.

“— Yup, she fights pretty well”

We’re still in the same old Zombie area, and the genre of monsters appearing show no signs of change. Stone passages and the occasional tunnel. And there were some graveyard forests in varying sizes as well.

The first thing I confirmed was Rem’s solo fighting ability. Whether it’s Skeleton or Zombie, if it’s a 1v1, she can win without much trouble.

Skeletons are dumb and never paying much attention, so if I give her the correct image on how to attack, she’ll go for it without an ounce of hesitation, bashing her spear into its bones. Once the Skeleton falls down, she’ll finish it off by breaking its skull with the butt of the weapon.

Zombies are a bit tougher than Skeletons. There’s ones that flinch when stabbed and ones that don’t. Most of the smaller, Goma Zombies are the flinching type, so with a few more stabs after the first one, it’s dead. As for the ones that don’t flinch, they’d just bite onto her, and she’d wrestle them down in most cases.

That being said, Rem’s body is only a collection of bones. Even if Zombies gnaw into her with their rotten teeth, she’ll only get minor scratches. Rem doesn’t feel pain, and there’s nothing like any damage feedback to me either.

So even when they bite, Rem uses her sub weapon, the Goma’s knife (originally mine) to stab and kill. After enough times with the knife, the Zombie’ll stop moving. Whether it’s after losing a good portion of its meat, or after shedding too much of its decayed blood, I don’t know the exact conditions for how Zombies die, but that’s how Rem’s been killing them. The only tough part would be that, unlike non-dead humans, they’ll keep moving right up until death.

“I think it’s better to keep Rem-chan beside you, she seems more suited for defending”

The great thing about Rem is that she won’t melt in Rotten Bog. Thinking back

on Blackhair Bind, my curses may be made to be non-interfering, or maybe they have nullification effects built in.

Anyway, as for Rem, who I can technically place smack dab in the middle of the bog, she is best suited to be my bodyguard.

Rem is holding my old spear and knife, which leaves me unarmed— would be a bad idea so I equipped that sheath-less knife I kept in my bag. I hung it at my waist with a cloth around it. That and, though it may be considered the most basic level of armament in the whole dungeon, but it's better than nothing so why not, I'm carrying one of those wooden clubs used by Skeletons.

It would seem like my weapons went down a rank, but thinking of our individual roles, this kind of gear distribution is actually more optimal.

"I really thought she'd help you out at front you know... Sorry, I couldn't make her strong enough to go into the frontlines."

"Ahaha, don't worry. I just thought if I accidentally hit Rem-chan, she could break"

Could break, more like, will definitely break. Just as Mei-chan has been destroying all those mob Skeletons, Rem would be in shambles no doubt.

"We'll have to practice so they can handle the vanguard as a team some day"

The next time we get allies, we'll have to at least keep up on that front.

And with Rem now acting as my shield, we make our way through the dungeon. With Mei-chan wielding so much raw power, our progress is steady as can be. There are the Goars that often appear in the graveyard forests which she can make easy work of. Our first encounter with these monsters was in their largest numbers we've seen to date, so the two or three coming out now are easy game.

And though they're pretty small, we can get cores from these Goars. I don't know how many we'll need for escaping, but gradually pilling up on them should help somewhat. Collecting materials now, and not when you need them, at which point the task becomes a chore, is gaming 101.

With the prime objective of core collection, we also collect the Goars' scales

and skins to occasionally repair Rem. Making Rem sleep, I use Vile Mud Doll again. This is when Rem's black chaos, the bog, appears, swallowing up the new materials along with Rem, and spitting out a shiny new version of her.

It's a pretty simple procedure, so I'm glad I can use her without concern. Even if it gets a bit rough, and her arm and leg bones get broken, I'm confident I can use Goars and Skeletons and heal her up right away. It's just, if she gets completely destroyed, I'd have to rebuild her from scratch so.

And it's about time I stop feeling guilty about that lookout incident. Though I can't say with confidence I can hold off on doing that again in the future...

And as if receiving divine punishment for these vulgar thoughts, we ended up in quite a bind.

This happened as we were walking along a normal passage. Suddenly, a large horde of Zombies came from the front and back as if initiating a pincer attack.

"Mei-chan, take the ones out front! I'll make the bog behind us, me and Rem will hold them off here"

"Yeah, I'll kill them quick, and come over right away!"

It was a pretty harsh defensive battle. There were much more Zombies than I thought.

"— Kuh, they filled up the bog dammit"

Less than a minute after I manifested my Rotten Bog, it was chock full of Zombie corpses. The Zombies that would try and advance even after falling in were stabbed at and forced back by Rem and her trusty spear. With my weakass Skeleton's club, I also pushed Zombies from the pool's edge.

I was attacking with the tentacles at the same time, so something really dumb like letting my club slip, it falling into the bog, and proceeding to melt into nothing, also happened.

Though by the time I lost the club, I'd already sunk a number of Zombies in the blood colored pool... but there was still a lot more to go.

I didn't have any space to step back and make another Rotten Bog. Mei-chan had been executing the Zombies out front at a rapid pace, but with her path

made strewn in corpses, a new bog wouldn't do shit.

"Kuh, enough already..."

There was around 10 more Zombies left. Not a number Rem could take on. And me going head to head with just one of them would lead to a swift game over. If it bit my neck, It'd be completely hopeless. At worst, I'd become one of their own like in those zombie flicks.

I couldn't expand the Rotten Bog. But I didn't have any other way of beating them. I had to make a new Rotten Bog any way I ca—

"No, I still have there!!"

I raised both my arms to call out Black Bloodline. On the back of both my hands, the same eye-like crest appeared.

I swung both hands to the side, and cursed blood sprayed out, sticking to the walls around me. That's right, walls. If the floor's no good, I could just use the walls.

"Putrefy, in the depths of vile red — Rotten Bog!!"

The blood-drops stuck on the walls transformed into pools of blood in the blink of an eye. It worked. Even vertical walls could be made into deadly pools of acid.

At this point, I'd gotten uncomfortably close to the Zombie horde that was running full speed.

"Sink into hell!"

Blackhair Bind leapt out from inside the bog like great serpents that just discovered prey. Moving nimbly, they snatched up the Zombies running ahead.

"BuaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaa!!"

I wondered if their pain receptors are still working? Forcefully slammed into the poison bog on the walls, the Zombies raised harsh screams.

The maximum number of braided blackhair tentacles I could release was four. With that many, I could catch multiple Zombies at once.

"Tch! still not enough, but—!"

Zombies would keep moving if they weren't well melted, but the ones slammed into the walls were pretty much all cooked. I could release them from the tentacles, and they wouldn't be coming after me anymore. They'd been highly damaged, and couldn't attack so I no longer needed to bind them, is what I mean.

I released the 4 bodies, and captured another 4. With that, it's 8 Zombies out of the way.

But I started off with 10. No, there was actually 12.

Two of those had their feet stuck in the acid mud and we're melting down. But the other two were stepping over their dead compatriots, and using the sacrifice of those last four, had avoided Blackhair Bind. They had really closed in on me.

"Gagaaa!!"

Right there, came in Rem, full verve. Her technique much sharper than I'd ever seen, Rem pierced through one of the Zombie's chests. But these past few Zombies we're all the large type. Those can't be so simply killed.

Its chest pierced through, the Zombie just kept coming, lodging the blade further into itself, closing in on Rem. That being the case, she couldn't take it out and attack anymore.

"You can do it! Push it away!"

Rem obeyed and, letting go of her spear, she grabbed the encroaching Zombie around its waist. In terms of pure power, the Zombie would win, but maybe because it was weakened from that stab, the undead actually staggered. Even the small Rem, using every ounce of power in her body, was able to somehow, some way, push the Zombie into the bog running along the wall.

The Zombie shrieked piercingly, and also—

"AaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!"

The last Zombie, was already here.

Twelve in all. Eight defeated by tentacles. Two died stuck. One held off by Rem. One more, the last remaining one, I lacked a single way of stopping it.

My spear is with Rem, the club, I lost a moment ago, I didn't have one good weapon. My sub, the knife, that I was holding was so short, it wouldn't serve as a smidgen of defense against this raging Zombie. Also, I really doubted if I could score a miraculous critical hit on its vitals with my shaky-as-fuck hands.

Dead, I'm sooo fucking dead—

“Don't touch my Kotarou-kuunnNAAAAAAa!!”

Man that's a scary roar, is what I thought when the Zombie's head burst.

An instant later, my slightly long bangs danced from the tremendous air pressure.

Ignoring the crumbling Zombie that was releasing decayed blood and brain entrails, I turned my head.

And there I saw Mei-chan's left hand swung to the back for just an instant. A pose like she'd just thrown something behind her without even looking. Incidentally, her right hand was using her axe as a shield against a Zombie. And before I noticed, her left hand had made it back to the axe-handle, whence forth she continued making mince-meat of the remaining Zombies.

Looking at the state of the Zombie's head and considering Mei-chan's hand movements, I guessed that she threw a stone behind her, achieving an splendid head shot at that.

“Mei-chan, you're... just epic...”

I couldn't imagine calling her something so over-familiar as Mei-chan anymore. With that much god-level skill, I'd much rather go with Mei-chan-san.
[2]

(TN: -san = mad respect bruh)

Thanks to her, the Zombies on our tail end were all gone. I also finished off the half dead ones with my tentacles.

“Haa... Haah... M-man, that was close...”

So we had that episode of danger in the Zombie area as well. Which just goes to show, you can't let down your guard anywhere in this dungeon.

Since something like this happened, Mei-chan started badgering me to carry Hirano-kun's sword on me as a last means of defense... So for now, probably until we get something good again, I'll be borrowing the sword.

So we switched up our gear, took care of the occasional Skeletons, Zombies, and Goats, and finally arrived at a clearing completely different from the other ones around here.

Hmmm, doesn't look like a boss room... but please, please just stay like that!

Chapter 45: Armor Bear part.1

“... Not a thing in there”

Was Mei-chan’s impression upon cautiously peeking into the room. And then I looked, and saw nothing there as well. A desolate room like that first Skeleton room we saw. Or actually, it’s more of a deserted space than anything. The walls aren’t even in stone blocks but have rough, rocky edges sticking out.

“The compass is showing straight through here”

“So we don’t have to bother with the other paths right?”

This cave-like room isn’t that big. The square-footing being around that of half a gymnasium, it’s like a circular hall. Since it’s empty and all, we could see from end to end. There’s the passage that the compass is pointing to, the one just opposite of us, and there are two more going into the 3 and 9 o’clock directions. If I also count the way we came in, this place would be a truly literal cross-roads. Every exit looks exactly the same, and without the compass we’d be impossibly lost.

“I think we’ll get to a fairy square after this”

“Yeah, we’ve been walking for a while, so it’s about time”

But it’s always these kinds of places that are set up as boss rooms. Though at a glance, it doesn’t look like the Orthrus’ room, since there’s clearly nothing here, and it may as well be a simple vacant room. I don’t see any semblance of a transfer circle either.

“I guess... there’s no boss here?”

“Who knows. The floor isn’t stone, so it could even come out from underground”

I’ve seen movies where some disaster class monster attacks people by detecting them through sound. Stuff like the Mongolian Death Worm is kind of a staple in fantasy works too.

“So, what now?”

“We’ll use Rem to make sure”

Now came the time where my little decoy comes in super handy. Never mind being hesitant, I’m absolutely giddy that I can put the mud doll to some good use.

Just as proclaimed in that painfully short description, she has the attribute of absolute obedience. Rem’s more than ready to carry out my scouting order. Showing not a bit of hesitation, she walks into the cave-like room.

I’m simply watching over Rem who’s only acting on orders, but Mei-chan kinda had a look of pity. Who knows, maybe she’ll snap if I gave out too many harsh orders? No look, you can’t make an omelette without breaking a few eggs alright.

As I was uselessly considering these things, Rem kept walking the span of the room when,

“GOoaAAAAAAAAAAA!!”

My whole body jumped from that single roar. You think it was simple fear? Nay, even the Orthrus let out this level of volume. The moment I heard this particular cry, I only felt pure terror. The reason? It’s very simple.

It’s because I know the originator of this voice.

“A-Armor Bear...”

It appeared slowly from the 9 o’clock passage, the great, gray form. Shielded by a sharp steel carapace, this is the most powerful monster I know.

As if announcing the continuation of the nightmare from that day, the Armor Bear had appeared before me once again. It had the same look, even the same intimidating aura as back then.

“Kotarou-kun, that’s the—”

“It was literally a miracle I could beat it one time. We need to avoid this fight any way we can”

I already told her about my struggle with the Armor Bear when we first met. With that peculiar appearance it’s got, Mei-chan must have recognized it instantly.

So as not to provoke it as much as possible, I suspended Rem's movements right then and there. Like a puppet with its strings cut, I stopped it dead still in the middle of the room.

"You aren't getting her back?"

"The bear's got a good nose. I think it knows we're here too."

Similar to when I dropped my lunch, or my gym jacket, the Armor Bear stuck its nose into Rem's completely still body, and started sniffing. But both visually and in the olfactory sense, Rem being only a collection of metallic bones was quickly judged as not appetizing at all. The Armor Bear lost interest in no time and—

"Ahh, shit... didn't work at all"

It roared after seeing us in the passage.

Shifting its large steel body, the Armor Bear slowly, yeah, just like back then, with the dignity of a ruler, it calmly approached us.

"I'll hold it back"

"No wait, it's better not to get up close— Rotten Bog"

Opportuning the fact that the Armor Bear wasn't coming with an all out rush, I make the attempt to try at a defensive battle of deadly acid. I really don't think it can make a great leap over the bog like a Goar would with the kind of body it has. If I manifest my maximum size, my 5 meter wide bog, it's gonna have to step in if it wants to get to us.

As my blood-red swamp takes shape, the Armor Bear is almost here. Seeing a sudden ominous pool appearing in front of it, it stopped as expected. And again as expected, it got close and sniffed. I was hoping it'd accidentally drink some and go die somewhere but—

"GooAA!!"

I guess I can't expect it to be that dumb.

So you get it right? Coming closer is dangerous, and you should realize there's nothing you can do about it so just—

“Eh”

The Armor Bear just stepped into my poisonous bog. Naturally, the crimson water with its unbelievable acidity was sizzling like crazy, releasing white fumes all around.

“GAA!!”

But that’s it. The Armor Bear was like, don’t make me walk this filth, punks, and made a cry of annoyance. It was crossing over my certain-kill Rotten Bog like no big deal.

“Get inside!”

“Got it!”

Me from the right, and Mei-chan from the left, we simultaneously leap out from the entrance. I also call in Rem, who was in suspended animation, so she comes back to me.

There’s a good reason why we didn’t retreat deeper into the passage, but intentionally entered inside the room.

First of all, since we saw how Rotten Bog won’t work, we can’t avoid close combat. If we ran back into the passage, there’s no telling how persistently this bastard will chase us. With the Armor Bear behind us, if we add in all the Zombies and Goars we’re sure to get along the way, it’ll be the worst case scenario. I can see no way of us living through that kind of deadly pincer.

So if we’re gonna fight it anyway, I’d rather we concentrate on the Armor Bear alone. And this place is better for Mei-chan too as she can use the full reach of the long axe. In other words, defeating it here, in this room, is our best and only option for survival.

Incidentally, if we try running to the supposed fairy square up ahead, it’d be useless. The fairy square is only a location where monsters inherently don’t approach, but if one sees their delicious prey scampering inside, it can step in with no real issue. It’s not a game-like, absolute safe place, and nor does it conveniently and omnipotently repel monsters and monsters only.

Anyway, Mei-chan perceived my will to settle it here. I don’t know if she

understands all the reasoning behind it, but really, someone like her, believing in me without the slightest hesitation, she's the sort ally I'd pretty much never find elsewhere.

We can do this, me and her. Some Armor Bear, we'll show it who's boss any day!

"Entwine its escape— Blackhair Bind"

The Armor Bear comes back from the bog with nonchalant demeanor as always.

It looks at Mei-chan, then me, and Mei-chan again, finally choosing her as its target. You really want that meat huh?

Damn fucking pervert, well I'll leave the name-calling to the side. The beast is seriously planning to take on Mei-chan, so I'm glad I can concentrate on support. That being said, I make no pause in unleashing Blackhair Bind at max strength. I can currently do 5 braids tops. Just one has the strength to stop a Zombie dead in its tracks, and each have a length of a whooping 5 meters.

Me going full-throttle, five blackhair tentacles bind the Armor Bear. Both forelegs, both hindlegs, and finally the neck, I entwine and restrain each part with a braid. The beast's advance comes to a grinding halt.

"HaaAAAAAAAAAaa!!"

And Mei-chan, fitting the name of Berserker to a T, would never let go of such a perfect chance. As if waiting for my support, just as the restraints looked set, with perfect timing she burst forth with explosive strength and—

"GAAAA!!"

As that sharp roar echoed, I was made to realize the utter meaninglessness of my curse. Every one of my blackhairs that were supposed to be holding the Armor Bear were suddenly torn to shreds, and were miserably blown off.

"Guh!?"

Fearing not the axe that could possibly destroy its helmeted head, the Armor Bear instead bashed against the blade in stark contrast of action. This acted as a counter and tackle at the same time, blowing Mei-chan away.

No matter how big I usually describe Mei-chan as, against a monster that's length-wise crossing 4 meters, she's nothing much. Her whole body danced through the air as if she had suddenly become a frail little girl.

"Ah, damn... My axe..."

She flew at quite the momentum, crashed and rolled on the ground, raising dust, but was nonetheless quick to get back up and, that's what she said. No talk of getting hurt, and not a single cry of pain, Mei-chan wasn't concerned about her own well-being or anything, but more about the loss of her weapon.

"Uaah, n-no way..."

There's a lot to say about Mei-chan and the state of her womanliness, but I'm pretty anxious about her loss of the axe just like she is.

The axe was coming at unfathomable speed, and the Armor Bear voluntarily tackling into it, the collision resulting in the sad destruction of the former. The blade had hit a particularly thick spike on the especially bulky shoulder armor. The spike was broken through, and the steel shell was marked with a gash, but that had been the limit for the weapon.

The axe's blade cracked apart. And what's worse, its wooden handle had snapped from the middle. It's clear that it won't be functioning as a weapon any longer. Mei-chan now only has this stick in her hand that was even worse than a wooden club.

"Mei-chan! The sword!"

The weapon switch-up turned out for the worse. The steel sword that is likely the only thing we got that can take on the Armor Bear is currently with me. If Mei-chan still had it, she could've counter-attacked right away.

The only weapons she has remaining are the fairly dull hatchet and knife, one each. Compared to the sword, the quality is like heaven and earth. And that difference is being demonstrated clearly right now, in this life and death battle.

So I started running, meaning to get it to her by any means.

"NO, Kotarou-kun!"

"I'll be fine! The Bear's still set on you!"

Glad she's worried for me, but if I don't put my life on the line here, we're both done for. The bog's poison was ineffective, and my blackhair restraints were easily broken through, putting a definitive end to whatever curses I had in mind for support. So the least I can be useful for is delivering a good weapon to her.

Clumsily taking out the sword from its scabbard, I shout out my orders.

"Go, Rem!"

Forget the bodyguarding, and go help Mei-chan. I imagine it impossible for her shabby Goma's spear to do anything to that tough armor, but just diverting its attention for a bit would be enough.

"GoaAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!"

As I attempted to move, the Armor Bear furiously chased after Mei-chan. After having slammed her with a tackle, it accelerated its large frame into a charge, and planned to take her down while she was still half standing.

"Kuh..."

Mei-chan had already corrected her posture, and nimbly dodged the rushing Armor Bear like a matador. But without any real weapon, she had no way to follow up with a stab to its defenseless back.

The Armor Bear swerved around in that posture, and bearing knife-sharp claws extending from its paw, it swung its massive foreleg like a storm. I'd be literally minced faced with that, but Mei-chan who'd since gotten a great grasp of her Knight skill, Foresight, dodged it by a hair's breadth.

"Dammit, goddammit... running out of time"

There's no telling how long Mei-chan's god-tier dodging will last. She's having to concentrate so much on this seemingly never-ending burst of one-sided attacks that she didn't have any way to counter with her knife or hatchet either.

Naturally, I can't just waltz into that sort of war zone, and hand over the sword to her. Even using Rem as a decoy seems iffy. I would fail the mission, and Rem would get destroyed meaninglessly.

Feels like I'm missing something...

“I got nothing to lose, so take this— Red Fever”

I use it on the Armor Bear anyway. But as it hasn't eaten any redshrooms of the like, I think a little heat won't bother it the slightest. It's already fired up and raging around, so a bit of extra body-temperature won't even be a bother.

But that's no biggie. That was only for the heck of it anyway. Here's the real deal.

“I'll distract it for just a bit alright!”

If it's Mei-chan, I'm sure she'll get what I mean. The only good thing about fighting monsters, you can shout out all your plans and there's no problem.

That being the case, I fire up my Blackhair Bind one more time. This time, I'm not making 5, but putting all that power together, making it bigger, longer, into one huge braid— no, weaving the threads precisely, I make it into a sash. The jet-black, glossy sash moved nimbly like the usual tentacles, and caught the Armor Bear from behind.[1]

(TN: So sash, or obi err... have you seen Tsugumomo? It's super interesting~ The manga is even better.)

“Gauh— ”

Freely moving according to my thoughts, the tentacle wrapped around the Armor Bear's head. Winding around over and over and, after just moments, it had made a turban for the beast.

But this bastard can easily cut up my hairs with the spikes in its armor. The reason my binding on all its limbs were shredded almost simultaneously was because they had caught into those thorns in its shell. Its head that looks like its wearing a helmet also equipped this manner of pointed protrusion, so my current means of restraint will be broken apart soon enough. Even without the spikes, it could use its fangs, its claws, just anything really.

But this definitely did blind the bastard, and stopped its attacks on Mei-chan.

“Thanks Kotarou-kun!”

Mei-chan swiftly takes distance from the Armor Bear, and runs towards me.

The Armor Bear looked boiling mad, scratching around its face as if it got

mites, it quickly tore apart the blackhair belt.

But when the bear regained its vision, Mei-chan had already arrived. We're completely out of the Armor Bear's range. And in one more step, I can hand over the sword I'm holding out.

"GaAAAAAAAAAAa!!"

Right as the mad roar beat into my eardrums, a shock ran through my body. A dull pain erupted throughout.

I didn't even know, what happened. Like what even. It felt like I was suddenly punched out of thin air.

"Uu, Aa... Aaa..."

When I came to, I was on the ground. Shit hurts. Not cause I hit my back falling, my whole body... no, more on my left arm, side, and thigh I guess. My whole left side is stinging like crazy. Like that time I was in a snowball fight in gradeschool, I got hit with a snowball right in the stomach. That ball had a rock inside which I swear was full of murderous intentions, and that's the sort of pain I'm currently feeling.

Ah, I get it now, it's a rock. It was rocks. In small pellets like a shotgun.

Earth attribute magic— I first thought, mostly cause the gamer inside me was fooling around. How fucking stupid. Tasting this humiliation, I thought how I should've realized this simple fact much sooner. Along with the iron-like taste of blood, the repulsive taste of dirt spread through my mouth.

That's right, the Armor Bear would know it won't reach us, so it used projectiles. Making a submarine pitch motion, it gouged out the earth and made it fly. For a bear that size, it'd be easy to dig up a decent amount of dirt. It did just that, and blasted the rocks found inside straight at me.

For the bastard, I'd imagine it wasn't that big deal of an attack, just a small revenge for my actions. But on my end, this kind of physical damage scores hard every time.

"GOAAAAA!?"

Seeing the Armor Bear yelling from the surprise pain, it just goes to show how

much damage it cause me. Good ol' Pain Return that likes to show up in the late-game made its appearance, and showed the bear what hurt feels like.

“Kotarou-kun!?”

Ah oops, sorry Mei-chan... The pain was a bit too much, I let go of the sword. It's a bit far to bring back.

“Ugh, Uuu... Ouch, f'kin hurts...”

Sure it's lame, I'm trying to stand up as tears blur my eyes. Shut up with the “Ouch”, the least you can do is play tough and do a “I'm all good!” From all the pain, I had succumbed to crying out, but returned back to action somehow.

But the simple fact that I can do so, only means that the Armor Bear that's way many times tougher than me can do it much sooner.

Pain Return is supposed to dish out the same proportion of pain I received, but the Armor Bear got up from its tilted posture, and as if saying its pain was already gone in the wind, it came charging.

“Kuh... yaAAAAAa!!”

In an instant, Mei-chan looked at me, the Armor Bear, grasped the situation fully. Drawing the knife and hatchet from her waist, she took stance. Forgoing the sword, she stood right beside the absolute hindrance that is me, and with those pathetic excuses for weapons, she determined to take the crazed Armor Bear head on.

“GAAAAa!!”

The storm of combat restarts. Right in front of me clash the rusty blades against sharp claws. It had become a domain I can't imagine to invade with my measly curses. And I didn't have the time to consider it either, their showdown saw its end instantly.

“—!?”

Knife cracked apart, hatchet broken midway. Still holding onto the weapons that had lost every part of their purpose, Mei-chan was blown away at terrific speed. The spray of scarlet arcing in the air told of the severity of her wound.

Their crossing of blades was over in a flash, but I could follow it, if slightly.

Mei-chan's blades had actually made it past the Armor Bear's shell, tracing along the joints in its shoulder and leg, but the issue was depth. With the plain horrid quality of her weapons, she only penetrated a slight bit of skin.

Since she had attempted to make her attack pass through that tempestuous chaos, this time, Mei-chan's Foresight couldn't make it in time to dodge. And she got hit. Even while abandoning all defense to make a fearsome Berserker's attack, she couldn't overcome the sheer difference in muscle.

"Mei-chan! Hang in there!!"

"Uuo, k..."

After having rolled on the dirt that covered her all over in mud, Mei-chan slightly twitched. But that's it. It wasn't like last time where she got up and ready for battle without delay.

I could see both Mei-chan's arms deeply wounded. She must've used them to block right on the verge of taking those claws.

But we all know there's no way you can block razor-sharp claws with naked skin. Her arms were torn up sleeves and all, and I could clearly see blood seeping out vividly. Even if she got the sword now, she wouldn't be able to put it to good use.

"I'll buy some time! Just get up somehow!"

I had Mei-chan keep Ointment A, along with a variety of meds on her person. Both her arms are in a terrible state, but her combo of Ointment A and Blessed Body, she should heal her somewhat.

It's our only hope of making a comeback. A Shaman like me doesn't even stand a 1 in a billion chance to beat an Armor Bear. And obviously too, we're already at the face-to-face stage, and there wasn't any poisoned food trap triggered beforehand.

Only Mei-chan can beat it. If we can't get her back into the game, this won't be a fight, but simple annihilation, no, from the Armor Bear's side, we'd simply be dinner.

So I absolutely need to put myself out there, hopefully buy some time so Mei-

chan can come back healed. Strangely, I didn't think of running away.

Maybe I can sense it instinctively that I have no chance in surviving if I ran away by myself.

"Ghrrrr!!"

"Hii!?"

Having that said, there's no way I'm not scared. It's great that I jumped out to block its path from getting to Mei-chan, but one glare from the Armor Bear, and my voice breaks, my body trembles in fear. With this crazy huge monster staring me down, I feel death looming right above. I'll become scattered meat any time this bastard chooses.

"C-c-co-come at me, damn bear!! I'll fuck you up!"

I stand before the Armor Bear as if trying to defend the fallen Mei-chan behind me. Looking at my tiny little knife, and pitiful excuse of a shaky-voiced taunt, the Armor Bear snorted roughly as if saying, "What's with this pipsqueak, fuck off", and continued to glare at me.

But I do have its attention now. Just like the time I encountered those delinquents from Kuro high downtown, at first, me and the Armor Bear are in a fierce stare down. It wouldn't be strange if those giant paws make my neck fly any time.

"What's wrong, you chicken!? If you're gonna do it, then do it, just don't kill me ok? Pretty please!!"

If it doesn't kill me, then I have Pain Return as my last defense. Those claws can cut me up, but if it's not fatal, then I can return that damage back. If I can at least get a gash across that shell, Mei-chan's chances of winning will go up all at once.

That's why, the only action I can take is akin to a suicide bomber.

Look at it Momokawa Kotarou, observe every millimeter of its attack. You avoid a fatality here, and the Armor Bear's as good as dead. So look at it, and make sure to—

"Ah"

I sounded, by which point, those huge claws were right in my face. They looked heavy enough to sever me into multiple sections. Like a large knife, they'd start from the tip of my shoulder, sending my meat, bones and entrails to an all expenses paid trip to dissection land.

It's totally over-the-top overkill.

And though I knew all that, I didn't move an inch. I couldn't move I should say. Leaving aside curses, it wouldn't make sense for a weak ass highschooler like me to actually dodge from a real monster.

My plans were all naïve.

“—aAA!”

Blood sprays. The feeling of something hot grazing my body is the same as back then. Yeah, that feeling of a sharp claw slicing into you, it's more of a heat than pain.

“AA! AAAAAAAAAA!!”

And the excruciation comes right after— wait, it's strange, it looks like I'm kinda alright. My uniform is still on me, and I haven't dropped my insides either.

In contrast, there were dregs of black bone sticking to me.

“Ah, AAAh... Rem!!”

And then I finally put it together. Rem had tackled me with all her might, and thanks to that I managed to avoid the Armor Bear's finisher.

I was saved. And in return, Rem became a sacrifice. Her skeletal structure left only from the chest up, everything below was scattered here and there.

Rem wasn't moving anymore. Still clinging to my fallen body, all her functions had ceased.

Sorry Rem, and thanks... You really were super useful.

“GoaaAAAAAAAAAAAA!!”

Looking at the roaring Armor Bear, I could see 4 gashes going across its body. It's thick chest armor shred apart, the lines ran down till its abdomen. Seems like those the tips of it's claws traced shallowly all along my upper body.

Me and the bear both shed blood from our wounds, and both cried out from the consequent pain.

“Tch, it still wasn’t enough, damn...”

It’s a level of damage where even I can stay conscious. Even if it’s shell is a bit cut up, the Armor Bear is A-OK.

Looks like, it’s prided armor being broken, its blood being caused to shed by some smallfry really got on its nerves. It was glaring at me like no tomorrow.

It raises its log-like, no, its massive steel pillar-like paw. Once that comes down, I’m dead for sure. I’m still lying on the ground here, and in no posture to move away.

Shit, its recovery speed is too damn fast— that’s all I could think as I stared tear-blurred at the paw raised over me, not even ready to accept this stupid death.

“—GAA!”

But that death didn’t come however long I waited. Before I noticed, its paw was lowered without cutting a thing, and as if it was completely oblivious of my existence, the Armor Bear was looking elsewhere. I could even tell from down here, those sharp eyes were cautious.

Just once, that huge Armor Bear, actually shivered.

Huh, literally what could be there that made this damn monstrosity scared? As I turn myself around with that question in mind, right there was Mei-chan, standing.

Her arms still dripping in blood, shrouded in a crimson aura, she was there, standing.

“Mei-chan, don’t tell me... you used Reagent X!?”

Chapter 46: Armor Bear part.2

“Mei-chan, don’t tell me... you used Reagent X!?”

It was very same that Goma’s narcotic that Mei-chan had once inhaled raw, causing her to rampage. It’s not currently on the level of a drug, but it’s a plainly hazardous substance nonetheless. Currently, she had an aura very similar to back then, when she absolutely slaughtered all those Goma and kind of tried to devour me as well.

She makes one powerless step forward like a wandering Zombie. A second, and third step. As she walks, she drips blood from her arms that had suffered severe cuts.

A fourth. As she makes that step, she raises her face.

And there, the usual gentle features were nowhere to be found. Eyebrows pushed together, the middle of her forehead was creased with absolute rage. Her pupils glazed in brilliant crimson, they looked like they belonged to a demon. (oni)

Taking in one large breath, the Berserker roars.

“GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!”

“GOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!”

For a third time, she and the Armor Bear clash.

Her gushing crimson aura leaves behind afterimages as Mei-chan accelerates. With speeds I didn’t think possible for human beings, she instantly closes the distance with enough force to leave the ground in her wake caved in in the shape of her shoes.

“UAAH!?”

Realizing that I was sitting in her path, I quickly rolled to the side and made way. But by the time I finished making those idiotic evasive maneuvers, she’d gotten to a much higher altitude than me. Jumping high, she made it all the way up to the biped-standing Armor Bear’s face (so an upward jump of 4 meters?).

Making that inhuman jump, she landed her heavy soles right on the bear's nose.

"FUGAHH!"

Must be the first time someone less than half its height kicked it smack dab in the face. The Armor Bear's massive frame actually tilted.

But only a bit. Quickly swinging its head back around, the Armor Bear used one of its legs to brace its stance. It then swung an arm in a fierce counter.

"Hmph, HAAAA!! "

After a sharp breath, her cry reverberates. Dodging the large swing with a swoop under, Mei-chan again lets her body fly, and with fists made in both hands, she pummels the Armor Bear's gut in rapid fire. I seriously wondered whether I was seeing things, but the moment of impact, that stomach covered in incredibly tough skin, seemed to undulate.

"Goa!? GUAAAAAA!!"

Unbelievably, human fists were dealing damage to an Armor Bear. There was the fact that she was targeting the area wounded by Pain Return, but still, what level of sheer force do you need in those fists to push back a beast 4 meters in size.

As fresh blood spewed from its recently made wound, the Armor Bear cries out in pain.

"YAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!"

Continues Mei-chan's barrage. As if the previous one-sided beating was completely turned on its head, the storming fists made a punching bag out of the Armor Bear, battering it mercilessly.

All that blood spattering everywhere, is it Mei-chan's or from the Armor Bear? Even with her arms bloodied red, her aura only gained in intensity, venting like fire. Hit repeatedly, the solid steel armor warped, cracked, and widened even more at its opening.

"Gah, oaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!"

However, the tough bodied Armor Bear won't go down just yet. Being in mortal combat this such of a fearsome human, as if to display its creed as a

monster, the Armor Bear unleashes a powerful counter with its claws.

Versus that, Mei-chan swings back a fist, poising to unleash her most supreme straight. Like an arrow launching from its bow, a great, a powerful punch is let loose.

For a second, it looked as if, her scorching aura all gathered around that very tightly gripped fist, twisting sharply into a point like a raging tornado.

“— Pile Bunker (Armor Splitter) [1]”

(TN: Fucccking キター—(°▽°)— — ! ...Eh? Why am I so excited? Well you'd genuinely have to read Kuro no Maou to find out ;P . Well for those who are going TL;DR, it's basically MC's *deus ex machina* move. The Spirit Ball = Genki Dama, in DBZ terms if you will.)

That fist spiraling crimson broke past the Armor Bear's chest. Bare human hands had penetrated a bosom of solid steel. Should be damn impossible, but right now I'm genuinely looking at Mei-chan's right arm pierced into the center of the Armor Bear.

“Gho, HaAAaa...”

She pulls out her arm. A gaping hole, as if made with a large drill, appeared in the shell covering its chest. From there, clumps of blood began exiting like a waterspout, and finally, the great Armor Bear fell.

Its mouth still open after the cry of anguish, the Armor Bear ceased movement. Now letting out an unending slew of blood from its chest, the beast kept soaking in a sea of that same blood.

“Haa... Haah... Did it, I... Beat it, Kotarou-kun”

Arms drenched in red, Mei-chan who was dirtied in her enemy's blood, looked to me and smiled. It was that very same, her usual, utterly gentle, beautiful smile. And held in that right hand, glistening bright crimson even while covered in blood, was a large crystal— the Armor Bear's core.

Then, as if her strings were cut, she collapsed.

“Mei-chan!!”

Damn, her stamina, mana, both of those must be at their limits. She defeated

the Armor Bear without receiving any fatal wounds, but since she had to use that drug, there's a chance she'll incur deadly levels of exhaustion. And though I had attempted to alleviate the drug's effects somewhat by mixing in the blueflower antidote in Reagent X, but we had no idea how effective it'd be.

"Shit, I'll get more antidote and... No, I gotta do patch up her arms first"

Beside Mei-chan who's fainted and lying on the ground, I turned over my bag and hurriedly prepared to treat her. Though I say treat, I'm only washing her wounds and applying meds on it. It's just like the time when I found her in that fateful fairy square.

First I'll use the remaining water in the plastic bottle to wash, to the best degree I can, her arms that look like they've been dipped in a barrel of blood. Just as I guessed, Mei-chan forewent using Ointment A to heal them and went straight for the Reagent X. It's all thanks to that choice she made that I got out of receiving the Armor Bear's deadly finisher. A so called point of divergence in my fate if you will.

Thank you. I can't thank you enough. Just look at these arms, these horrible wounds. Luckily it didn't get to her tendons, or cut deep enough to show bone, but the amount of bleeding was insane. To kill the Armor Bear bare-fisted in this state... Perhaps Mei-chan has already left the domain of humanity.

But that doesn't change the fact that she needs immediate treatment. I'm thinking that with her Berserker skill #2, Blood Boost, she won't die from blood loss even after losing a fair portion. She's supposed to have shed a ton of blood, but her complexion still looks alright.

Her life isn't in danger, is what I'd like to think.

I prayed to God. I'm not sure if it's appropriate to pray to Ruinhilde-sama, the God of curse, but even so, I prayed devoutly, while treating Mei-chan's wounds.

"Haah... W-with this she'll be..."

Alright, I wan't to hope. At this time, I saw that Mei-chan was breathing gently in her sleep. Breathing, pulse, both look good. And her arms, with all that Ointment A I laid on, I'm sure I can leave the rest to her Blessed Body.

But I'll be fully relieved when we've relocated to a fairy square. If we're

attacked by monsters as we are now, we're done for. With me alone, I can take on one Zombie at most. If they come by the hordes, or if there's even one Goar, that's an instant game over.

"GOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!"

That roar hitting my ears caused all my thoughts to freeze.

No, just NO, impossible. This, isn't damn fair. As thoughts that attempted to escape reality appeared inside me, so did dreaded beast.

A second Armor Bear. Like the one over there with the gaping hole had, this one also entered slowly from a passage.

"A, u, aa..."

Our eyes meet. It paid not the slightest glance at its dead friend, and looked straight at me. A pair of humans all covered in blood.

It's over, I can't, think of anything.

I could run. Yes I could, but my feet don't seem to feel like moving.

Running away, and dying somewhere else alone... But then, dying here together with Mei-chan seems a bit nicer.

Together? No, the hell are you thinking mate. I've got myself the greatest curse ever. It can take anything down with me if it's a 1v1.

"Fuh, hah, haa... Y-yeah... Not an issue... Mei-chan, this time, it's my turn to protect you"

I'll take down this 2nd one with Pain Return and die. Mei-chan might just wake up right after. If it's her, she can go through the dungeon herself. She can survive.

And, she'll get out of this dungeon, get to the kingdom, and then, it could take a while, but if she can make it back home to our world... then this life of mine, might have some worth yet.

Dying to protect a girl, it's glorious. For a man, it's damn well the greatest way to die.

"Haah... Haa... Hah, Hi-hihaha..."

Levels of despair and tension skyrocketing, I leak a weird laugh. My heart's been beating annoyingly loud for the past while.

The hell, fuck this noise, least you can do is let me look cool when I die. You know, like, See ya sweetheart, don't miss me too much.

But man, if I know it'd end like this, I should've risked getting beat down, and rubbed Mei-chan's tits at least once.

Those vulgar and stupid thoughts are the only ones running through my mind, nothing like that revolving lantern effect I hear so much about. Just goes to show, once a useless chump, always one.

"Fufuh, ahahaha... Bite me, then die bitch"

A fierce roar pierces into my ears. The Armor Bear bore its fangs, running towards me, a sole helpless prey—

"Lux Sagitta!"

White light shone. Pure white, powerful light that could almost blind you. Oh man, I'm like, dead now right? No pain? That's great, I can rest in piece.

"UAAAAAAAAAA!! Hot, TOO HOT!?"

I'm alive, I realized when I felt the afterburn hot enough to roast, and started rolling around yelling like a dumbass.

"Are you guys alright? Don't die yet!"

"So this is that Armor Bear. Looks strong"

"Waah, this bear-san, looks kinda super tough"

"G-good luck, girls!"

Upbeat voices of girls go around. I'm not deluded enough to think these are from a bunch of playful angels from heaven. I'm alive. And I'm still in this hell we call the dungeon.

"Help! We can't fight anymore!"

There isn't one speck left of the me wishing for a nice peaceful death. Joy. The utter happy emotion I'm feeling to be alive is driving my soul towards survival. I legit don't want to die, and almost can't believe I was planning a means of

suicide just now.

Whatever pain, whatever disgrace I face, I really, I just want to keep staying alive.

“Gauh! GOAAAH!!”

The Armor Bear made a ferocious roar at the new humans that appeared... but seeming to realize that it's disadvantaged, it turned around and headed back into the passage it came from.

“Haah... Haah... Yes, YES... we're saved”

In so much relief that I'd faint, I saw a real angel smiling.

“It's a relief you're alright, Momokawa-kun”

That smile from Souma Sakura, was simply, beautiful. Ah, if you smile at me like that, I'll darn be heartstruck.

But right now, my heart's so full of happy that I'm alive, that I can't add in any love or any of that jazz. Look, I'm a simple dude: I see big tits, I'm all in.

Starting off with those rather rude first thoughts, I thus met Souma Sakura, and her merry bunch.

Chapter 47: The Souma Harem

“So then... Hirano-kun and Nishiyama-san are...”

After Mei-chan and I were rescued by Souma Sakura and her group, we relocated to the fairy square that was, as expected, close by. There, we decided to first get our stories out.

Mei-chan was treated to the best degree possible, and though she wasn't in any danger of dying anymore, she was still fast asleep. That being the case, we'd have to do twice the labor in talking so I decided to go first.

“A two-headed Orthrus huh. If only we were there. We could've beat it with without any victims...”

“It's bygones Asuna-chan. We never chose to be all split up like this”

The ones twisting their faces in regret from learning about new deaths are, the samurai girl, Kenzaki Asuna and, our resident busty loli, Takanashi Kotori.

I bet I couldn't even looked these total hotties in the eye if it was in our old lives. These two aren't just pretty or cute, but like, more like, they exude this aura or presence that only really beautiful people seem to. If it were me from a while ago, my head would've simply gone blank, and this dialogue wouldn't be something we could call as such.

“After that, it was just me and Mei-chan. We somehow managing to stay alive and get all the way here and... well you've seen the rest”

If it's only about how much of the dungeon we've gone through, there isn't much to say. The only parts Souma-san would be interested in would be about how her childhood friend, Reina A. Ayase, was acting together with Higuchi, and concerning the people who've died I guess. The people I've confirmed to be dead are: Takashima-kun, Itou-kun, and the Hirano-Nishiyama pair. There's also the girl being eaten by a bunch of Goma I saw a while back. Still, that makes it a whole 5 people who're no longer with us.

“I'm so glad we made it in time”

“I can’t thank you enough... Seriously, two Armor Bears would’ve been impossible for us”

“But just one should be pretty strong. I didn’t see you guys have any good weapons so, is it that Futaba-san has a powerful vocation?”

“More like, is this girl really Futaba-san?”

Takanashi-san’s question is perfectly valid. If you compare the current Mei-chan to her from back then, I bet even her parents would have trouble recognizing her without a second look.

The peacefully sleeping Mei-chan would go for a perfect role for Snow White or the Sleeping Beauty with how pretty she’s turned out lately. Hmm, looks like she got thinner again.

Could be a side-effect of Reagent X. More of those extra pounds were shed, and her muscles were toned to a point where her body line had literally zero resemblance to the previous barrel shape it used to describe. But the bust and hips still kept their same tremendous mass. Her’s was a genuine body of miracles.

But despite the super-speed diet treatment, there was no slack on her skin. This must be the grace of Blessed Body. If she ran for a beauty contests, this would be a tremendous cheat skill.

“Momokawa-kun, Futaba-san doesn’t look like she’ll wake up any time soon, so mind if we start on our side”

“Sure, that’s alright, I was just gonna ask too”

Well, there’s that thing I’m impatient to ask about... but they likely know what that is and are likely planning to tell the whole story and ease into it. Whatever the case, I need to gather info before making any sort of decision. I’ll hear them out.

“After getting thrown into this alternate world, we quickly received our Vocations and started our own journey into the dungeon—”

Completely unlike my pathetic attempts at fighting my way through this hell, Souma-san’s time in the dungeon went so smooth, it was like she was a player

in an RPG. And why wouldn't it be? After all, she got to join up with her brother, Souma Yuuto, right at the early game.

"A Hero... So there really is a vocation like that"

"Yes, I happen to be a Saintess, and Asuna is a Dualwielder so there is probably other specialized vocations out there too"

I got a slight migraine hearing all these clearly over-powered vocation names. This is that so called social disparity isn't it? Seems like even in another world, the distance between an average Joe like me and utter geniuses like the Souma siblings is greater than Heaven and Earth.

"But I think nii-san's Hero is a special case in an of itself"

"Yeah, it's hard to admit, but Souma's strength is at a whole new level. If he wasn't there, we could've gotten victims in that Cerberus fight"

"Souma-kun's totally amazing you know, he beat that Cerberus all by himself!"

Cerberus as in... pretty much the higher form of the Orthrus that took us everything to defeat. Apparently, it was much bigger too. And worse, it was firing out flamethrowers all the time, so there must be a wide difference in power too. And it's no doubt a much stronger monster than any Armor Bear.

And to cut down that absolute monster of a monster all by himself, yeah, it's no joke or nothing, Souma Yuuto literally is rightful holder of the title of Hero.

"So why isn't Souma-kun with you guys now?"

Souma-san and the others seemed to have come to this fairy square by warping from the boss room after beating the Cerberus. They beat the boss no problem, so it's strange that Souma-kun isn't here.

"That is... right before teleporting, we ran into some trouble"

"Eh? Trouble? You mean there was still monsters in the boss room after you beat the boss?"

"No, not monsters, people"

Souma-san hangs her head with a dark expression while Kenzaki-san knits her

thin eyebrows in frustration.

“Don’t tell me,”

“That’s right, it was a group of boys from our class—”

They used the core from the Cerberus to invoke the warp, and right then, three boys from class entered the boss room. Ueda, Nakai, and Shimokawa, nicknamed the totem-pole trio, they took position as Higuchi’s lackeys. They weren’t punks on the level of their boss, but they weren’t exactly people you’d nominate as good samaritans. They didn’t have the guts to dye their hair, but always waxed it to tremendous shine. In short, they’re a bunch of half-assed delinquents going to a prep school of all things.[1]

(TN: The 3 ppl named in order have the kanji for top 上, middle 中, bottom 下 in their names, so they’re the 上中下 trio, which I paraphrased as totem-pole trio. Also, as some folks may see dyeing your hair as a regular part of life, japs seem to consider it in a bad light.)

“Hell YEAAH, do it, bro!”

“Gotcha— Aqua Bind (tidal whip) !”

One of the three, Shimokawa, made his blue wand glow, and shot out a slender whip of water. Like a snake chasing prey, it serpented through the air latching onto Takanashi-san who was standing inside the transfer circle.

“Takanashi-san!”

“Kotori!”

Souma-kun and Kenzaki-san were the first to react and reach out for her. But by then, Takanashi-san had already been whisked away by the water whip.

“Sick!! Got me a Kotori-chan guys!”

“Oi, you gotta get Sakura-chan, dickhead!”

“Get Kenzaki too yo!”

“Shut it fags, we only got one try at this, so I pick my fav, duh!”[2]

(TN: I’d like to apologize if these guys sound too wierd, I don’t really interact with media (or in reality) with individuals having this sort of disposition. Also,

and I'm making an educated guess here, from the last three dialogues, who is who? Obviously, the last one is Shimokawa who used the water magic, he likes lolis I guess. but the other two? Well, if you look at the attendance record, it has Ueda listed in the Archery club. Why would this DQN be in the Archery club? It's obviously explained in chapter 1, how ppl joined to breath in the air let out by Souma Sakura. So the one asking for Sakura is Ueda. That mean's Nakai's waifu is Kenzaki, wew lad. Anyway, I think there's another joke in there with their names, how Shimokawa → bottom, likes the small loli. I don't know about the others.)

They kind of started making a fuss, while Takanashi-san was kidnapped over to their side.

“Those three had eyes filthy in desire. I don't even want to think what they'd do to Kotori”

“Uu, it was soo horrible...”

Her small body shivers as Takanashi-san snuggles close to Kenzaki-san.

“I could imagine it was this bizarre situation we're in that turned them mad”

“Well, that and the power frenzy from their vocations should be factored in there too”

Three guys risking life and limb in the dungeon, and when they finally find their colleagues, it's a full blown Souma Harem... Yeah, I can't say I don't understand their impulse to attack. But seriously, how retarded do you have to be to attempt something like that. They're either stupid beyond belief, or got high from Goma drugs. I myself would never dare to incur the wrath of Souma Yuuto, nope.

“So then, Souma-kun isn't here because he went to save Takanashi-san and couldn't make it for the teleport?”

“Yes, you're exactly right. Nii-san rescued Kotori, and somehow got her back inside the circle but when...”

When he tried to get back, the trio who didn't want to let go of their hunt got into a scurmish with him. As a result, the warp got started up and they all transferred here, leaving behind only Souma-kun.

“Sorry... It’s cause Kotori’s so easy, she got kidnapped and stuff...”

“Don’t worry about it Kotori, it’s over now”

“And I’m positive that nii-san can make it alone just fine”

Souma-kun is strong enough to crush a Cerberus by himself. So he’d have literally no issues making it in the dungeon. And it isn’t even a debate if he’ll lose to the totem-pole trio.

Plus, it’s not like he had to use the transfer circle in that boss room. In the Orthrus area, it was pretty much a one way street so we had to use the warp to get out. But in the Cerberus area, they apparently had many other paths to take that weren’t being shown by the magic compass.

And it’s very likely that the trio and the Souma party took different routes to arrive at the same boss room.

“Then, how about we keep on the move with an objective to join up with Souma-kun, how’s that sound for a plan?”

“True, we don’t have any choice other than moving forward after all”

Souma-san strongly nods. She’s obviously worried for her brother, but she she’s calm enough to not go crying about it to someone like me at least. And I wouldn’t be any help if she did either.

“I’m just making sure here... It’s alright if both of us go with you too right?”

“Of course. We aim to get together with all our classmates, and escape this dungeon with every one of us.”

“That’s great, thanks”

If I make it look like I’ll cooperate, it should be fine. Even without Souma-kun around, these girls seem pretty powerful from what I’ve been hearing. They’re at least strong enough to make an Armor Bear flee.

Souma-san the Saintess can not only use light attribute attack and defense magic, she also has the all important healing magic. Dualwielder Kenzaki-san is a pure powerhouse for our frontlines. The Sage, Takanashi-san is useless in combat, but her equipment remodelling is an amazing power in itself. The gear on these girls is obviously at a different dimension from ours.

Mei-chan wouldn't be in this condition from some Armor Bear if she had gear that good.

"But look Sakura, you remember what happened just now. There's obviously gonna be people who won't cooperate with us"

Kenzaki-san's sharp glare pierces into me. Woah there, maybe she's... No she's definitely suspicious.

"... Erm, I know I'm a guy too, but my vocation's pretty weak, so even if I thought about doing something, I couldn't do it"

"But with Kotori, it might not be impossible"

"Hiee!!"

As if some bad memories resurfaced, Takanashi-san clung even closer to Kenzaki-san. That's fine and all, but please stop looking at me with those scared eyes.

That being said, it's true that I can do anything to Takanashi-san by my own strength if I was up for it. Forget vocations and that crap, I may be small and weak, but there's no way I'd lose in a match of strength against a cute little girl who's even smaller than me. Plus, I have my Blackhair Bind and can literally restrain her like Shimokawa did.

"H-hey wait a sec, I'd never do something like that alright? I'm like everyone else here, I just want to get back to our world. So I'll cooperate with anything you want"

"Asuna, that was a bit much I think"

"Well sorry. But after that already happened, I'll can't not assume the worst case. And that time, I just left Kotori to Souma but... This time, I'll be the one protecting her"

"Asuna-chan... thank you so much"

Such charming friendship. But it's sad that I have to face suspicion because of it. If I make myself their enemy, I'm good as dead.

"No, I know I'm not all that familiar with Souma-san or Kenzaki-san, so I can understand if you not trusting me so easily. I guess it's natural I'll be doubted

being a guy and all, but uhm, you could look at it long-term and uh...”

“That’s right, rather than growing paranoia from both sides, if we work together for some time, I’m positive we can form mutual trust”

Mutual eh. They have the ability to forcefully remove me from their group if they want, but I can’t do the same. I’m the one who has to watch myself and show respect. Honestly, that’s pretty mentally straining, and it’ll be an environment where stress builds up... But that’s still alright. I’ll walk the fate of one boasting the title of weakest, of the Shaman.

“Also, Momokawa-kun, I need a bit of a favor from you too”

“Sure, what is it?”

I look to be asking, but I have a pretty good idea what that favor is. She wants...

“Nh...”

“Ah, Mei-chan!? You’re awake!”

From right behind me, where she’d been laid down on the soft grass, I clearly heard her leak a tiny voice. And as I suspected, though a bit out of it, Mei-chan opened her eyes.

“... Kotarou-kun, you’re safe, thank goodness”

“Yeah! It’s all thanks to you, Mei-chan, you beat that Armor Bear good”

Her gentle smiling face truly looks like a goddess incarnate. I’m almost pouring in tears from my eternal gratitude. Thank you, thank you Mei-chan.

“I’m glad, I’m really, so happy... I got to protect Kotarou-kun”

“Sorry Mei-chan, I made you go through all that. I’m sorry I couldn’t help at all”

“Not at all, don’t worry about that. Fighting is my role after all... but Kotarou-kun”

She’s sure to have some fatigue remaining. Mei-chan heavily raises her upper body and sits up.

But with sharp eyes that don’t mark a hint of weariness, she then glared at

me, no, the individuals behind me.

“— Why, are those two here?”

There's two more members in the Souma-san party that rescued us. Class 2-7's prided Class Representative, Kisaragi Ryouko. Shiramine Academy's track and field ace, Natsukawa Minami.

Those very same people who once left Mei-chan to die, her ex-party members so to speak.

“P-please calm down and hear me out, erm, those two, we're kinda working together now and—”

Basically, what Souma-san was trying to request of me was about Class Rep and Natsukawa-san. She wanted me to help convince Mei-chan not to begrudge them, or practically speaking, to prevent her from going into a killing frenzy all of a sudden.

Of course, I'd have done that without her asking. Leaving aside the wrong they caused Mei-chan, losing these potential allies at this point in time is full of demerits. For safer dungeon capture from here onward, having Class Rep the Ice Mage and Natsukawa-san the Thief would be a ton of help.

There's no way Mei-chan isn't, even if slightly, resenting them, but right now, I gotta do something about—

“Sorry Futaba-san. I shouldn't have decided on that back then... No, I won't make excuses. I truly regret abandoning you from the bottom of my heart”

“Sorry, I'm so, so sorry... I couldn't save you...”

They probably aren't doing this for show. Class Rep and Natsukawa-san both have a grave expression, and look like they're heartfully apologizing. These two should also have a proper sense of ethics and justice. They're surely not cold-blooded enough to justify themselves for abandoning their classmate, saying it had to be done, and that it was that classmate's fault to begin with. I'm sure they've been feeling anxiety over it too.

But that doesn't mean the victim in all this will so easily accept their apologies.

“Mei-chan, please bear it for now. I know you have a lot to say but...”

“No, it’s fine, I’m alright Kotarou-kun”

As if having discerned something, Mei-chan’s expression softened all at once.

“Class Rep, and Natsukawa-san too, it’s fine about back then. I understand that you had no choice and had to leave me behind.”

“But we—”

“It’s fine, really. I don’t resent you at all, I actually want to thank you, in fact. I mean, it’s only because you abandoned me that... fufu, I got to meet Kotarou-kun”

A beautiful smile that stiffened my spine. What the, what’s this strange intensity. Mei-chan is undoubtedly a lovely girl right now, but like, you know, it’s because of that beauty that I feel the total bizarreness.

“I got saved by Kotarou-kun, and then caused him a lot of trouble too... but then, I finally got stronger. I’m not a useless pig anymore. I’ve become— A Knight, who will protect Kotarou-kun”

“I, I’m grateful that you’re saying that. But even if you can forgive me, I still can’t forgive myself. So for a while longer, let me atone for it please”

“M-me too! This time, you can count on me too!”

Ah, looks like Mei-chan hid the Berserker part. That’s the only reason she’d expressly name herself a Knight after all.

We can’t just trust Souma-san and the girls off the bat. So like the time we joined Hirano-kun’s duo, We’ll have to keep a few secrets.

“Man am I glad you guys made up, or reconciled I guess. If Mei-chan got mad, I’d be in a real bind”

“Geez, what do you take me for, you!”

Hahaha, we laugh as usual, and seeing that, the nervous Class Rep and Natsukawa-san also loosen up a bit.

With that, our new party’s inter-personnel problems were solved for the time being. Only on the surface though. The problem now is, how well we can

actually coordinate... I'm a bit uneasy, but we'll find that out soon enough.

Chapter 48: A Shaman's Gear part.1

Before heading into the dungeon, we started off by refreshing our equipment.

“The area ahead from here is largely divided into two types”

“One side is shown by the magic circle, and it continues deeper into the dungeon. The other route goes through the forest outside. The forest route has Skeleton soldiers, and also Goma who we think may possess equipment stolen from the Skeletons. If we go there first to gather materials, we should be able to take care of our equipment to a certain degree”

Souma-san and her group had apparently done some investigation after landing on this area. If they had finished preparing after their first scan of the area, they'd have left already, and wouldn't have been involved in our crisis.

“So the Armor Bear got here because it's connected to the forest huh”

“Souma's the only one of us who fought that bear, but I'll bet we can take it down with our current power”

With a proper vanguard, and attack magic shooting from the rear, even an Armor Bear would down on its luck. Kenzaki-san isn't just being over-confident here. Fact is, that Armor Bear backed off right away.

“Then should we head off after a bit more rest? Futaba-san, you just woke up after all”

“No, I'm perfectly fine. I can move anytime”

Replying like a veteran mercenary, Mei-chan was munching on a bunch of fairy walnuts, accumulating that nutrition in a wild fashion. How utterly manly. That demeanor fits the Berserker to the T.

“Futaba-san, you know, you don't have to force yourself”

“No really, I am fine. Look, my arms are healed up too”

Wow, they really are. Mei-chan put out her arms to show us, and though her sleeves were still a mess, the actual arms underneath not only had no wounds, but was back to their original spotless, beautiful skin.

“Souma-san, you used your magic to heal me right? It worked wonders see, thank you”

“Uh, huh... But my Healing Light isn't all powerful alright. Please don't overestimate it. What I'm wondering is, Futaba-san, you're tremendously quick to heal aren't you?”

“Yeah, maybe it's that. I think I have a skill for that too”

Her talking so fluently with that Souma Sakura is kinda like, like they've been on equal footing since forever. When standing amongst these all-star pretty girls from class, Mei-chan who has attained beauty not losing to their own, she somehow seems stunning.

Feels like she's gone to a different planet. Honestly, right now you could say I've gotten myself in a harem-like situation with 6 total hotties surrounding me. But I can't be happy about this at all. My shoulders are simply too thin. The only guys who ought to stand amongst girls like them are Souma Yuuto, or Tendou Ryuichi. Any other boy would be like me, just gawking awkwardly, or get into a crazed high like a horndog.

“Ah, that's right, Natsukawa-san, do you still have my knives?”

“HHhe!?”

Natsukawa-san jolts so hard, I kinda feel bad for her. Faced with the kindly smiling Mei-chan, she's already in tears. Yup, this girl is absolutely terrified.

“I'd like to get it back, if I may? I lost most of my weapons in the fight before”

“HYeass! I has it right here!”

Hii, replies Natsukawa-san in tears, while she clutters around her waist to retrieve a short-sword, and hands it over to Mei-chan. The shorter than average Natsukawa-san standing face to face with the tallest girl in class, Mei-chan, really paints an fierce picture. Their height difference is like that of an adult and child. Line them up, and their busts would show a similarly grand dissimilarity.

“Thank you”

Mei-chan who recieved the knife cheerfully, had surpassed any delinquent extorting someone out of their pocket change, and looked like a yakuza (mafia)

member collecting all their belongings and property.

Well then, about this, now returned to its rightful owner, knife...

Kill Carver A kitchen knife not for cuisine, but thirsting blood, it was reborn to kill.

=====

|Kill Carver| |A kitchen knife not for cuisine, but thirsting blood, it was reborn to kill.|

=====

Now then. We got ourselves this Kill Carver with a very ominous name and description, but with that I now have an idea of just how powerful weapons can become from Takanashi-san's remodeling.

"Hey lookie Kotarou-kun, this spear isn't rusty at all!"

Mei-chan was coming over with a spear in hand that looked to be in very good condition. I could use it, or give it to Rem, and this iron spear would work great.

Behind her, there's numerous iron helmets wearing Skeleton soldiers, all looking bisected, and piled in a mountain. All of this was Mei-chan and her Kill Carver.

Once unsheathed, you can see a shiny blade and, a slight red aura drifting from it. It's the same sinister aura let out by Mei-chan when she uses Reagent X. The thing's unnatural ferocity is now out in plain sight, and its practicality was demonstrated right before my eyes.

Currently, she has Hirano-kun's sword in her left, and Kill Carver in her right hand in a dual wield. She would usually use the long reach of the sword, but vying to get familiar with the sharp knife as well, she settled on a blade in both hands. The Berserker Mei-chan's physical strength is off the charts already, so swinging around heavy iron swords is a cake-walk.

"I never thought Futaba-san would get this strong... it's like she's a whole new

person”

After gifting me the spear, she went back energetically to the front lines. Seeing that valiant back, Class Rep made a complicated face.

“Yeah, a lot happened after all. And look, Mei-chan’s a Knight so this kind of power must’ve been in her all along”

“But you’re the trigger to let that out that power, Momokawa-kun. Just what kind of magic did you use to change that perpetually scared girl into a heroic knight like this”

“Ahaha, it wasn’t me at all... I’m thinking she just broke through the proverbial glass ceiling after fighting so desperately for a while”

I slide the subject with a dry laugh. What changed Mei-chan wasn’t some amazing magic, but narcotic drugs that mess with your reasoning. It isn’t a big secret, but it’s not something to be open about either.

“How about we go a bit more?”

“Yes, sounds good. Let’s”

Kenzaki-san calls out and Souma-san replies, and all of us keep moving along the stone passages.

There’s been quite a few combat situations like the one just now, and I somewhat got a grasp of their powers.

Their vanguard is Kenzaki-san the Dualwielder and Natsukawa-san the Thief. Rearguard is Saintess Souma-san and Ice Mage Class Rep. Finally there’s the Sage Takanashi-san, who needs guarding. Now adding to that, there’s Mei-chan the Berserker, also in the vanguard, and me, the Shaman positioned in the rear. We’ve never had a party so well balanced. Yeah, I feel like with all of us, any group of mob monsters will be dispersed easily. It’s like we’re in a well balanced dungeon crawler game.

“Hey uh, Souma-san, between Souma-kun and Kenzaki-san, Hero and Dualwielder, how much of a difference in power did you see?”

“Eh, between nii-san and Asuna? Let me think... There’s wasn’t that big a difference in raw power. Just that, the Hero is somewhat, it feels like that class

grants a special sort of power”

“Like when he beat the Cerberus?”

“Yes, no matter what the crisis, he can make a breakthrough. It’s that sort of seemingly bottomless strength.”

“So without that, him and Kenzaki-san are basically equal?”

“That may be true. Both of them have grown up with a lot training after all. It’s almost similar to the power from a vocation”

Damn I’m cool. Just look how I’m having a normal conversation with that Souma Sakura. While somewhat really surprised how this is actually happening, I quietly analyze the new information I’ve received.

I guess that’s what you get being a Hero, it’s one hell of a special vocation. This mysterious power that suddenly awakens and bursts through all obstacles when it counts the most, would be the meat and potatoes of Souma-san’s story. But I can’t be so optimistic about such an unknown power that seemingly rescues you from any pinch. I’ll have to consider Souma-kun’s solid skill as a swordsman and how it fairs against Kenzaki-san.

“Then how’s Mei-chan? Compared to Kenzaki-san I mean”

“It’s hard to believe, but Futaba-san looks to have the same level of ability as Asuna”

Natsukawa-san is in track and field as we all know, and her along with Souma-san have no experience in martial arts. But with the vocation of Thief, she attained a high prowess in combat... However, her experience in this world is a large contributing factor to that prowess, and she clearly falls behind the actually experienced ones like Souma-kun and Kenzaki-san. If you think about it, it’s an obvious result.

Even if they get supernatural powers in this world, compared someone with similar powers, what matters in the end are individual differences. But throwing that theory completely out the window,

“Futaba-san isn’t supposed to have any of this sort of experience, no, she’s supposed to be a normal girl”

“And you’re saying she has the skill to match Kenzaki-san?”

“It may be her natural talent, or else, it’s a result from their difference in vocations. I don’t see the real reason”

Strengthening one’s vocation is up to the individual. But then, if you’re granted high-spec powers, you can overcome things like experience just like that.

“Yeah, I’m kinda relieved hearing that”

“Relieved? How so?”

“Err look, Kenzaki-san and Natsukawa-san have been using so many different skills while fighting. Mei-chan doesn’t have such a rich array of skills after all”

“... Momokawa-kun, you can see them using those?”

“Yeah well, it’s pretty obvious”

Like, both of them have been doing double jumps and all. No way they had those back in Japan.

“Kenzaki-san has one-shot attacks like Slash. A single bladed one, and one let out from both swords. Also, there’s one that lets out a shock wave after piercing through. Well, these are just my guesses from what she’s been using, for the past while?”

“And Minami? What about her?”

“I know from Mei-chan that she has Slash. But it looks like she can do two of those back to back. But what’s more amazing is that Natsukawa-san can dodge with Foresight even while moving super fast with High Walk. I think she also has Repel, but maybe she’s not too confident in its power. I didn’t see her use it often”

“I wonder, did you happen to watch martial arts matches often Momokawa-kun?”

“Nope, not at all”

I have literally no interest in that area. I’m more of a big fan of anime, manga and games. Always looking forward to epic finishing moves or super-tier magics

being used in fantasy battle stories and such. But say I did watch martial arts, I'd have no idea what move was used or what technique was being carried out.

But no way am I spilling out all that jargon. I at least have the judgement to avoid my otaku fanboy-ing in public.

"I, see... You've been watching well"

"It's life and death after all"

Depending on how the vanguard fairs, us in the rear could get into deep shit before we know it. So obviously we need to understand each others' strengths and weaknesses. Though it's not like a total noob like me can tell much from just looking.

"I'd like to talk a bit more about everyone's skills once we get back, that alright?"

"Yes, of course. We need to do that or else we won't coordinate well after all"

And like that, we smoothly finished gathering materials. The groups of Skeletons or Goma weren't a match for our amazing trio in the frontlines, so us in the back didn't have much to do. Nevertheless, the shamefully weak nature of my curses have indeed come to light.

I can't just use Rotten Bog with party members who aren't used to it, and I haven't reconstructed Rem either. In the end, all I could manage was some harassing from Blackhair Bind. I can't help but be jealous of Souma-san and Class Rep shooting off light and ice attacks left and right.

But the most annoying part about being in the rearguard was that Takanashi-san. As if using me as a shield, was always standing right behind me. Well, that was the formation so I can't complain too much... but having someone right on your tail is pretty annoying.

Don't bring along non-combatants dammit, I want to complain, but even though the fairy square will hinder entry to monsters, it won't do the same for beasts. In other words, horny bastards like that totem-pole trio could come in so we always have to be together, is what it is.

Takanashi-san has this super convenient self-defense skill, namely Sacred

Tongue: “Word of Rejection”, so frankly speaking, her safety is guaranteed even more than mine. In live combat, I may as well count as the bigger piece of excess baggage.

She also has this Mana Analysis skill. It’s like her remodeling ability with the fountain, but with this it doesn’t even have to be a physical magic-imbued object, but also stuff like magic shot out by monsters. Depending on the type she can understand it, so she’s not entirely useless in combats either. And it even feels like Mana Analysis can act as a higher form of my Intuition Pharmacy. If it has mana, she can handle magic and objects the same, so the skill’s multi-use capability isn’t limited in the least.

But the least you can do is carry a spear or knife like, for self-defense, are my honest thoughts. Takanashi-san being so frail, she only carries cores in her bag. Though I’m not in any position to tell her that. I’m pretty much the same level of useless as her at this point.

Anyway, there were some annoying points, but our harvest was excellent. Plus I got to see first-hand how these girls fight. You could say it was a very fruitful practice session.

Incidentally, we were doing so well, that we made it to the exit into the forest outside. Since it was a good opportunity, we tried heading in a bit and... hell yes! We found ourselves those some of those delicious snakes, three even. This is great Mei-chan, tonight shall be a feast.

Well, when those 5 pretty girls saw how Mei-chan was joyously hunting down snakes and brute forcing apart their skin, we got a real jump out of them but... Fufun, once they know this taste, they too shall become avid Snake Hunters no doubt.

Chapter 49: A Shaman’s Gear part.2

“... Woahh, this remodeling, is pretty amazing”

Takanashi-san had taken the materials everyone gathered and put them through her remodeling. Seeing all the shiny new equipment lined up, I was honestly impressed.

Iron Spear A general quality spear.

Iron Short-sword A general quality short-sword.

=====
|Iron Spear| |A general quality spear.|
|Iron Short-sword| |A general quality short-sword.|
=====

The weapons given to me look like 2nd hand goods compared to the ones carried by our frontliners, but shiny blades with no rust are more than good enough for me. The quality is unbelievable. I’m guessing what this remodeling does is, it cleanly collects the iron only from the materials and reconstructs everything into a blade of the same shape and size. Shove in 2 or 3 of those rusty short-swords, and her remodeling can dish out a sparkly new iron short-sword. The logic of bunching up only the good bits to make something of better quality is fine and all, but then, where does all the rust go? Who knows. They like, completely vanish. After the remodeling is over, you can only find the finished product inside the fountain and nothing else.

But let’s not sweat the small stuff. It’s all good if we can get quality weapons. But here’s where it gets better, you can actually mix in monster parts during the remodeling process. A synthesis of sorts.

Red A saber made with Cerberus claws as material. Embers fly with even light

Saber swings.

=====
|Red Saber| |A saber made with Cerberus claws as material. Embers fly with even light swings. |
=====

A so called elemental weapon. Apparently, when Souma-kun beat the Cerberus, likely due to some special ability of the Hero, the monster turned into light particles and got absorbed into him. However, this ability is convenient in that it has the smarts to leave behind the core. And further conveniently, it also leaves behind monster parts that could be well used in the remodeling. Apparently, other than the core, the other parts are ones that hold a lot of mana, and that’s seemingly how it discerns between what to and what not to leave behind.

And so they now possess claws and fangs from the Cerberus.

What man, we getting Drop Items now?— I want to retort, but I’ll refrain.

Anyway, with that Cerberus claw supplied alongside Kenzaki-san’s Knight Saber, she got out the new and improved Red Saber.

“This is really good... Look, fire’s coming out”

“A genuine magic sword I see”

Even the cool and collected Kenzaki-san and Class Rep are wide eyed looking at the flames that spouted after swinging the sword. I myself went “Woahhh!!” and got all excited.

Still, all this material quality improving and even adding elemental attributes, feels like we’re really making weapons, or I should say, like the crafting you see in games. You’d normally have to get tools for manufacturing iron or other metals, like molds and all sorts of equipment, and also the right knowledge. This is all something Remodeling can do all in one go. You could even call it a cheat skill.

The crafting produced by this magic figuratively scoffs “MUDA MUDA!” at all the industrial achievements founded by the human race in all its history, as if proclaiming the utter futility of it all. I feel a bit complicated seeing a bit of magic easily surpass modern science, but my life is on the line here, so I’ll gladly take full advantage of it. My Rem is pretty similar in that respect too. Plus, whatever my complaints may be, Takanashi-san’s cheaty production skill has already become indispensable for our survival.[1]

(TN: IS THAT A JOJO REFERENCE!!1 XD— yes, yes it is.)

As I was pondering in my positive impressions, she’d made one more, another fire element weapon.

Red Knife

A knife made with Cerberus fangs as material. It is said that a malevolent devout had once used this blade to pierce into his sacrifices, before finally burning them at the cross.

=====

|Red Knife||A knife made with Cerberus fangs as material. It is said that a malevolent devout had once used this blade to pierce into his sacrifices, before finally burning them at the cross. |

=====

“Hey, why’s mine have a scary description again, hey you!?”

Natsukawa-san was overjoyed at receiving her new firey knife synthesized with the Cerberus’ fang. Swinging away at the red-hot blade that spit embers, she sent those feelings of gratitude to the weapon’s creator, that is, towards Takanashi-san.

“UAA~N! Hope you like fried chickeeen!”

“W-wait, Kotori doesn’t write these thiiings!”

That’s some good heat it’s giving off. That should let her take on tough bodied monsters too. I’d very much like Mei-chan to also equip herself like this, but it seems like those small Orthrus fangs simply can’t exert Cerberus-tier levels of

fire.

Roaring Steel A halberd crafted with good steel and fine metallic monster carapace.
Halberd The oversized axe blade is its specialty.

Roaring Steel]A sword crafted with good steel and fine metallic monster carapace. Its
Sword blade is longer and wider than the norm.

Steel Short- A short-sword crafted with good steel.[2]
sword

=====

|Roaring Steel Halberd| |A halberd crafted with good steel and fine metallic monster carapace. The oversized axe blade is its specialty.|

|Roaring Steel Sword| |]A sword crafted with good steel and fine metallic monster carapace. Its blade is longer and wider than the norm.|

|Steel Short-sword| |A short-sword crafted with good steel.[/tn]|

=====

(TN: The Red weapons’ names are as is. 剛鉄 — Goutetsu — Roaring Steel)

They didn’t get an elemental attribute, but Mei-chan’s new set of weapons are of incomparably higher quality from the stuff she has been using before this. What needs special attention is the fact that we used that Armor Bear’s carapace as the synthesis material.

Since we used the Armor Bear’s metallic skin, Steel made an upgrade to Roaring Steel. According to Takanashi-san, this Roaring Steel is heavier than ordinary steel, but much harder in contrast. The weapons themselves were made larger than normal, so while they’d be unfit for someone like Natsukawa-san with her speed-centric fighting style, it’s pretty much a perfect match for a mega-power fighter like Mei-chan.

Incidentally, the reason it’s not an axe but a halberd is because we couldn’t collect a good enough long-axes to serve as its base. The Skeleton captain’s halberd is one of the easily attainable high quality weapons, so that was the

main choosing criteria on this occasion.

A halberd is like a combo between a spear and an axe, so you can both slash or pierce. It's pretty convenient like that, or so it would seem. As it has multi-usage functionality, wielding one can get fairly technical, is what I've heard. But as the user was Mei-chan, her super Berserker powers can draw out its potential with any weapon. She'll get used to it in no time, so I'm not too worried.

There's Roaring Steel Sword that was improved upon from Hirano-kun's sword. And the Steel Short-sword which will be a spare. Well, she's already got the Kill Carver so that one won't see much use I guess.

Now, we're all done getting everyone's respective weapons in order, but there's one more thing that I, have to get over with.

"... Alright, looks like everyone's asleep"

It was decided that we would travel along the correct route after getting some shut-eye. My watch tells me that it's a bit past 1 AM. Everyone went to bed around midnight, so they should all be frolicking in the land of dreams right about now.

Me and the girls were split up such that our sleeping areas are on opposite sides of the fountain. The other side currently has paradise with 5 beautiful young ladies lined up sleeping, but this side just has the sole man, me, all by his lonesome. But right now, that's fine. It's more convenient this way. The reason — I don't think I need to explain too much. It'll be my 2nd time doing this after all.[3]

(TN: OK I seriously double checked about there being 5 girls on the other side, I don't know why man, there's supposed to be 6 right?)

"Outside the square is a bit... yup, bad idea"

I bounce towards a corner of the fairy square. It had a fairy walnut tree, plus with the fountain, it's a double blindspot. Pretty much the ideal location.

"Haaa... Man, this is nerve-wracking..."

My pulse is rapidly rising. But it's better than last time, since I guess I got used

to it a bit more. But it's probably mostly because I'm not doing it while looking at Mei-chan.

"Calm down... you need to do this, don't keep avoiding it and revive Rem"

No wait, if I calm down, doing this will just get more difficult. I need to be excited more or less. You can do this, me.

"... Haah"[4]

(TN: Hmm... somebody was asking for silver lining in the comments :^))

Along with a heavy sigh, I have once again successfully collected the final ingredient to make Rem, the Vile Mud Doll. I thought it'd end up this way, so I had kept my exclusive collection tool, the condom, all nice and cleanly washed. There's a myriad of reasons I resent the prospect of using this again, but I can't afford to choose my methods. Like, do you think I can ask those lovely party members if they happen to have one?

Honestly, I'd rather not walk this tightrope. I want to make Rem without using this if possible... But the previous Rem's power was greater mostly because this semen was used as an ingredient, it would seem.

This assumption comes from when us and Rem were fighting together. I happened to come into contact with her a lot, and somehow understood how she was made and stuff. It's not like I can suddenly open up a game-like status screen for her, read descriptions and look at different icons and what not.

But from experience with all my other curses, where I just get it when I'm not supposed to logically know something, I can be sure that the information is correct. Therefore, once I felt that semen is an essential component, it became indispensable. There's a limit to materials, so I don't have the leisure to try out a version without semen to see if the power actually goes down.

I thought about it. There's the safe route of explaining everything and having them understand, but something tells me the moment I start on that subject, I'd be kicked to the curb, so nope.

But I absolutely need Rem in my current state. I can't just rely on Mei-chan for everything. If Rem wasn't there, I would've been killed by that Armor Bear.

We'll be heading back into the danger soon, and I could die instantly if I don't have Rem substitute for me in a dire situation.

The girls might find out, but my fear and sense of self-preservation takes priority. I don't want to die regretting not making Rem here and now.

Anyway, I'm done collecting, so all's well.

After I'm done, no one would know Rem's ingredients from just looking at her. And they wouldn't bother to find out. I just mixed some monster materials and done, what of it? I could simply persist. That way, it's not embarrassing for me, and the girls won't care much either. it's a win-win for everyone.[5]

(TN: win-win is such a fun word, remember to make a circle with your index and thumb while extending the other three fingers when you say it. Also, watch Sakura Quest... it's super fun lol.)

Now, same as last time, I'm perfectly prepped for Vile Mud Doll. A Skeleton captain's bones will serve as the frame this time, and I added in its core too. Additionally, what was before Goar scales is now Armor Bear shell. Both quantity and quality of materials have been bumped up a notch. I'm definitely getting a more powerful Mud Doll Rem after this.

Plus, I've already had Tananashi-san prepare a 2nd Steel Spear for Rem to use. So her armaments are also receiving an upgrade.

"Fufuh... This is kinda exciting"

From all the new prospects to power up, I unconsciously let a smile show, and with the now well filled adult rubber balloon in hand, I get on my feet— and right then,

"Momokawa, what are you, doing over there"

Spine froze.

She found out. She saw. How, why. Bad thoughts rush in one after another, making my head a vomit-inducing swirl of disorder. But even within that chaos, I quickly knew who she was.

The person standing there when I slowly turn around—

"Don't move!!"

“Hii!?”

Glaring at me with eyes like the devil incarnate (an oni) , there stood Kenzaki Asuna, with her sword at my throat.

Author’s postscript: This is unrelated to this story, but “Kuro no Maou V: Witch in Love” is now on sale. There’s a gaiden chapter you can only get in this published version so please have a look![6]

(TN: This is a few arcs ago in KnM, when he got Evil Eater, and Wrath Pun battle I think. I haven’t seen the book so I can’t be too sure tho. Anyway this is just advertisement for the book, but apparently the gaiden’s pretty cool. Author summarized it somewhat, and it’s a what if about if Kurono never escaped from the lab. He apparently still meets Lily somehow, and there’s characters that appear in the ch 500s in that gaiden (the book comes out in that time frame), so I guess with current translations you don’t really have a grasp of some of the characters. Anyway, my point is, if you happen to buy the book, can you please send me scans of the illustrations inside? I’ve been really curious about this for a while. And my second point is, we should totally badger Yoshi to translate it lol.)

Chapter 50: Crack

“Answer the question Momokawa! What the hell were you doing just now!”

“N-no wait... just wait ok! Watch the sword...”

Her sharp blade pointed at me, Kenzaki-san seems extremely agitated. She is so mad, I can't begin to describe her as only angry. She has an air around her that's telling me that any form of excuse or small talk will cause my neck to drop by her wrath. No, in her current state, if I zip up now, she might just do it unconsciously.

Having fallen into an abrupt and unfair state of crisis, I can't say I'm calm either.

“Sto-stop... Kenzaki-san, if you kill me, you'll also...”

“Bastard! After excuses you start threatening now!”

“Uaaah, I'm sorry! B-but, I'm telling the truth. If you accidentally stab me, you will get the same wound. So the sword, please pull it back...”

It'll be too late after the deed is done. I made sure to clearly explain to everyone how my Pain Return works. But holy shit man, humans are such valiant creatures, braving any danger if they get a little too mad. No, I guess it's because Pain Return doesn't have any sort of solid form, so I can't expect them to intrinsically get that hitting me is a bad idea.

“Shut it Momokawa, don't underestimate me— Hmph!”

“GUH!?”

Kenzaki-san drew back her sword, but as soon as she did, a fist landed in my gut. It wasn't anything like a frail girl-punch, but heavy like an iron ball. It was a devastating punch.

Naturally, my abdominal muscles being as weak as they are, I couldn't bear the attack at all. Strength drained from my knees, and I collapsed onto the ground right there.

“Uh, Ugh... ow, ow... hi,c... ow...”

I cried with a pathetic voice. The sting in my stomach hurts so bad, I felt it'd be better to simply die than suffer through this. The pain was too much, I had no capacity to feel shame or dishonor.

This pain and humiliation is the same one I felt when I was lynched my those Goma. It should be the 2nd time, but you never get used to this kinda shit.

"Tch... It's the curse. How annoying"

I breathe deeply to control the pain, and look upwards. There, stood Kenzaki-san with a face warped much more than can be described as merely annoyed.

She definitely got a taste of the same pain as me. But the hell's with this difference in reaction. How does this woman keep standing so normally after getting gut-punched this hard... No, this too must be a result of our difference in vocations. A Dualwielder like Kenzaki-san is adapted to battle, and must have a high degree of pain resistance. Though it could also be a result of her long years of hellish sword training.

"Hah, haa... haah... K-Kenzaki-san, why are you... doing this..."

I can't hold out if she attacks again. The intense pain slightly subsided, so I try to speak up. Presently, I have no methods to end this other than trying peaceful dialog. No matter how unfair she's being, if I return with, "You punched me! Fucking bitch!", that's like asking for assisted suicide.

Ah man, being weak sure sucks.

"Why he says... Bastard, you tell me if you understand what you just did"

The hell do you want from me, don't ask if you already know.

"You dog. You sure got guts doing that while us girls are sleeping right there, huh Momokawa!"

Well fuck you too, I went out of my way, all the way into this corner, out of courtesy alright. You're talking as if I raped someone in their sleep.

"Souma never did something like this, not even once... This is why men are such"

"Haah...haah... Kenzaki-san, you've got it wrong... I just, really needed this for my curse, and..."

“Stop making excuses! Have some shame!”

Grabbing my collar, she forcefully makes me stand... not even. Kenzaki-san being the tallest among us below Mei-chan, my small body lifts easily into the air. I couldn't touch soil even if I stretched on my tip-toes.

My neck is, a bit constrained too. It hurts.

“I'm sor... wait, stop... don't hurt me...”

Begging as if I'm about to be killed, I ready myself for another punch.

“You really think I'm letting you off after you—”

“What in the-, Asuna, what's going on here? What's all this shouting for”

Right then, a voice came from the direction of the fountain. This intonation and tone, it's Class Rep.

Maybe because she was called by name, Kenzaki-san let go of me. Ouch. I fell instantly and landed on my butt.

I'm saved— isn't something I can gullibly assume. Maybe her appearance doesn't mean she's coming to mediate, but actually that the situation just leveled up into a group lynching.

“Oh, Ryouko, sorry for waking you up”

“You woke me up too, Asuna”

“Hmm, what's up~, what happened guys?”

Following Class Rep, Souma-san and Natsukawa-san also called out.

“There was an incident. Listen guys, this bastard—”

“... Kotarou-kun?”

Mei-chan had also, woken up. With this much noise, I'd find it weird if she hadn't.

Mei-chan was rubbing at her sleepy eyes. But the instant she saw me, those eyes changed. It was the Berserker's eyes. Those that she makes to slaughter monsters.

“Kotarou-kun!”

Mei-chan appeared in front of me in a flash. Her speed being super-class, I mostly didn't even see her run.

"Ah, Mei-chan..."

But when I saw her large body standing to defend me, Ah fuck, how pathetic. My tears won't stop. Finally, now at least, my life isn't in danger. I was relieved from the very depths of my heart.

"J-just what, is going on here"

Me, Kenzaki-san and, coming to the rescue at sonic speed, Mei-chan. With this much of a dangerous scent drifting about, Class Rep quickly caught on. The other three rushed over. Since Takanashi-san isn't here, she must be out like a log.

"Momokawa, talk. Don't make a girl speak about such repulsive things"

Even a guy can't outright say stuff like, I was masturbating. And you seriously want me to open the closet in front of class 2-7's prettiest girls gathered around? No, their prettiness aside, I'd doubt my sanity if I could calmly say something like that to any girl.

"... I was, masturbating here"

But I said it. I had to, or else we wouldn't solve anything.

"Eh, EEH!? What, you mean you..."

"Please, tell me I misheard..."

"Ni-nihaha..."

I'm dying from the shame. Class Rep made a face like she was flabbergasted. Souma-san, as if she'd heard something so obscene she'd barf. Natsukawa-san was completely drawn back and making a wry smile. As for Mei-chan, I'm too scared to check.

"L-listen I, I don't think I have anything to be guilty about. This was absolutely necessary for my curse and... But you seriously can't show something like this to anyone, so I tried to do it secretly and..."

"Enough with the excuses, Momokawa—"

“Stop that Kenzaki-san. You’re scaring Kotarou-kun”

Kenzaki-san still looks like she has a big knuckle sandwich ready for me, and Mei-chan boldly stands in front of her to prevent her from dishing it out. Her wide back defending me looks so strong and reliable.

“That’s how it is, so everyone can go back”

As if declaring, Nothing to see here, Mei-chan casually attempts to disperse the crowd. And naturally, everyone says “Alright, we get it—” and the matter comes to a close, and that doesn’t actually happen at all.

“Futaba, are you seriously sticking up for Momokawa?”

“This doesn’t even count as sticking up or anything. What did Kotarou-kun do wrong anyway?”

From Mei-chan’s tone, it seemed like she believed me word for word. He didn’t have any ill will, he only did what had to be done. She’s speaking as if she’s blatantly ignoring my sin of performing self-pleasure in the same room where all the girls were sleeping.

“You heard what he did. This bastard’s been looking at us girls with lecherous eyes all this time. And he even has the gall to explain himself with a curse or whatever. Do you think we can forgive this?”

As for Kenzaki-san’s opinion, I can’t say I agree with all of it... But I can half concede that her’s would be the correct reaction from a girl. Getting so mad as to put a sword to my neck and punching me in the gut, is a bit much. But she’d obviously feel disgusted to no end if there was some scumbag fapping in the same room they’re all breathing in. It’s an issue of psychological nonacceptance.

“I uhm, well, I don’t feel too good about it...”

“N-nihaha, I don’t really, get that sort of stuff so...”

Class Rep and Natsukawa-san weren’t screaming stuff like, “You disgust me, sick wanker”, and displaying outright disgust. But clearly they’re hastily sliding the subject. These two aren’t doing this out of considering for me, but for Mei-chan. They’re weak against her right now. So they can’t express strong

opposition towards her.

“Futaba-san listen, even if what Momokawa-kun said happens to be true, I honestly believe that what he did was bad. What he did was, for a young man, clearly lacking in delicacy”

But in contrast, Souma-san spoke with conviction. Once a girl says it like that, no man in the world has any way of making excuses. It’s a guillotine. Lack of consideration, lack of delicacy. For women, those can become valid enough reason to condemn a man.

“Delicacy? Souma-san, are you seriously blaming Kotarou-kun with a worthless reason like that?”

Cut the jokes bitch, they ain’t funny, and this ain’t no time for ’em either, capisce?! I almost heard a sort of rageful inner voice coming from Mei-chan’s reply.

“It’s a very important reason. Look here, including you yourself, there are currently 6 of us girls here. And the only boy among us is Momokawa-kun. But even if he’s the sole boy, we must not forget our morals. If not, the whole team might suffer from the friction”

“So, you’ll force only Momokawa-kun to endure it, is what you’re implying?”

“He’s the only one now, but later on, if we join up with any of the other boys, these rules will stay the same”

“Nonsense. Just admit it, you just want yourselves to live comfier lives”

“I don’t believe I’m asking the impossible. Since, when nii-san was with us, nothing like this happened at all. Just think about it, in our current situation where both sexes must work together, we need to maintain the rules”

“And let me guess, you, Souma-san, will be making these so called rules?”

“No, not just me, all of us”

Majority rule. That is a concept any Japanese knows and has learned to accept.

Were my actions right? Or were they wrong? We don’t even need to vote on that. Out of the 6 girls, Mei-chan is the only one on my side. Getting a majority

vote is a pipe dream within a pipe dream.

“Futaba, how come you’re trying so hard to protect Momokawa?”

“I could say the same, why... why are you getting in Kotarou-kun’s way?”

“You saw how he’s so adamant about what he did. You’ve been with him all this time, Futaba. Who knows what he’s been doing to you”

A sudden pang of guilt stabs at my heart. That day when I made Rem, I had sinned heavily, performing the lookout. If I went like, At least I didn’t touch her, I’d really get my neck offed by Kenzaki-san.

“Futaba-san, I won’t be insensitive and ask what sort of relationship you have with Momokawa-kun. But even if you’ve sworn yourselves to one another, in our current circumstances, having sexual relations would be simply wrong”

“Hmph, aren’t you simply jealous you can’t get Souma-kun to look at you that way?”

“T-this has nothing to do with nii-san!!”

Souma Sakura raises her voice all too suddenly. A-and with ferocious intensity. I had always thought that she had this air towards Souma-kun that made them have such a pink atmosphere that any normal couple would have to admit defeat but... I totally didn’t expect this. It’s no joke, Souma Sakura actually loves her own brother.

“Hey wait, Sakura, calm down... alright, and Futaba-san too, I really need you to not pursue this”

“Oh, sorry about that. It’s not like I don’t understand your feelings. I didn’t mean to mock you”

Class Rep slides in with perfect timing. And I’m glad Mei-chan backed off too.

“No, I’m sorry as well... I lost my composure a little...”

That right then wasn’t what I’d call a little. She said it with so much passion that, I bet her fanclub’s chairman would faint if he ever saw it.

“Whatever the case, we are all in this mess together. So Futaba-san, you’d at least agree that we need to establish some rules correct?”

“Sure”

“About the incident with Momokawa-kun, I could say not everyone had a proper grasp of the do’s and don’t’s. So let’s rule it as a mistake due to ignorance. And it’s not like he defiled anyone either”

You think I can be that daring? With these girls of all people? I don’t have enough lives for that. But I’m grateful you actually said some facts.

“We let you off with just one punch. You should be thank our tolerance Momokawa”

“Punch, Kenzaki-san... did you perhaps, hit Momokawa-kun?”

Holy crap. I just saw a little bit of that red aura drifting from Mei-chan’s slightly trembling shoulders.

“Cause he was saying he’s gonna curse me or something. I gave him a good one in the gut. I was going pretty easy on him too, but he started crying like a pansy. What a weak excuse of a man”

“...You’re dead”

Mei-chan tightens her fist, and the aura begins to swirl. I get reminded of that Armor Bear getting ending up with a hole in its chest. Yeah, she damn well has enough power to kill someone with her bare hands.

“No don’t! Mei-chan!”

I made a full spurt tackle, grabbing onto Mei-chan’s waist as if I was an American Football player. But, like that 100 year old sacred tree in the shrine near my house, she doesn’t even budge. But, soft. And a tight waist. She’s seriously slimmed down huh— wait no, this ain’t no time to be impressed.

“Kyaa!? Kotarou-kun!?”

An unbelievably cute voice leaks from the bloodthirsty Berserker. I’m literally the only one being desperate here. Does Kenzaki-san even realize she was standing on the fine line between life and death?

“Mei-chan, I’m glad you’re doing this for me, I really am. But this time, I did something super careless so don’t!”

The girls' eyes towards me clinging to Mei-chan was severely painful. So I quickly took my arms off her waist, and in the same movement, prostrated myself. It's the ever famous bowing down in a dogeza.

"I'm deeply apologize, it was all my fault. Please find it in yourselves to forgive me"

There is some shame. But I'm not particularly resenting them. Mei-chan got angry for me and, though it might be inappropriate considering the situation, I was really happy. That even I had at least one ally. I can't be more thankful for her trust towards me.

"Asuna, and Sakura too. Look, Momokawa-kun is even lowering his head, let's forgive him"

"Yes, I'm fine with that. I can't think blaming him any further would be productive"

"There won't be a next time, Momokawa"

And having attained clemency, I finally stand up. Ah, legs are a bit shaky. Must be damage from sacrificing my pride. I wonder how Mei-chan is seeing me right now. I, who was so quick to dogeza. I'm scared to look.

Calm down, just relax, me. I honestly feel like crying right now, but there's something I just have to finish saying.

"...Uhm, excuse me but, the curse I was trying to do, I have permission to do it right?"

If I can't make Vile Mud Doll, there would've been no point in going through all that pain for a little bit of semen.

"Momokawa! You little—"

"Wait Asuna. Momokawa-kun, that curse of yours, do you absolutely need it?"

"Vile Mud Doll is a curse that creates a golem. If I have this, it can become a shield at sudden unprecedented moments. When we fought the Armor Bear, it was because that golem took a hit for me that I didn't die"

"And to make that, you uhm... you have to use that?"

“Without it, its power drops drastically. It’s like, how alchemists use it for making a homunculus, heard of that?”

“... I see, if it’s like that, then I guess you’d need it”

“Oi, Ryouko, what’re you talking about. What’s all this about that homun-whatever-you-said”

“I’ll tell you about it later, so please keep quiet”

As I’d expect from Class Rep’s extensive knowledge. Plus she has good judgement too. It’s super helpful.

“Anyway, you’re free to make that Mud Doll of yours this time... You already have, that ingredients right?”

It’s sorta cute how Class Rep is having a hard time asking. Honestly thought she’d gotten used to this business with Tendou-kun... is she perhaps, inexperienced? My condolences, Class Rep.[1]

(TN: Yup this sentence has a lot of nuance and innuendo lol. You probably get it, but I’ll selfishly explain anyway. He thought she had sex with Tendou Ryuichi already. inexperienced = virgin. condolences because Ryouko clearly likes him but he won’t notice, much less do the deed with her.)

“I just need to chant it out and that’s it”

“Uh-huh, alright then... As for the next time, let’s think about that at another occasion”

“Oi Ryouko, this guy didn’t get it through his head at all. As I thought, he needs some—”

“Asuna, I know you’re very strict about these things, but you need to relax a bit too. The rules weren’t set, so there won’t be any penalty either”

“If it was our dojo, it wouldn’t have ended with a beating”

“Sakura said it remember. We’ll all be deciding on the rules from now on. And making them too strict would, that in itself create friction... Anyway, let’s just go back to sleep for today. We’re leaving in the morning right?”

Though reluctant, they probably didn’t want any more stress either, so apart

from Mei-chan, the young ladies silently headed back to their place of sleep.

“Uhm, Class Rep, thanks”

“... If it's thanks, tell it to Futaba-san”

With a somewhat tired smile, Class Rep withdraws in quick steps.

“You too Mei-chan, can't thank you enough. You really saved me”

“Why... did you stop me”

“Of course I would, we can't start something with those girls over this little thing”

“But Kotarou-kun you... it was, so awful, you, you even had to dogeza and...”

Why's Mei-chan making a face like she'll cry? I'm the one who lowered his head in shame, right?

“No problem, since they calmed down after I lowered my head, it's great result-wise”

“But, but then...”

“It's really no problem. You believed in me Mei-chan, so I'm fine”

“... I'm so sorry, Kotarou-kun”

Ultimately, full drops of tears indeed fell from both her eyes.

I'm stumped. How does one go about consoling a girl in these cases, I really have no clue...

Chapter 51: Cave of Insects

“Kyaaa!? Wh-why? How come there’s a monster in heeere!?”

Morning. I wake up to the piercing shrill sound of Natsukawa-san’s scream.

“WHAT!? Where is it!”

“Eh, what in the, just, what is this spiky black Skeleton?”

“It looks terribly ominous... there’s no doubt it’s a fearsome monster. Get back everyone. I’ll use my light magic to—”

“UAah! H-hold your horses Souma-san!”

And so I prevented the newly reborn Rem from being destroyed by a hair’s breadth.

“—I see, so this is the golem you made, Momokawa-kun”

I introduced Rem to everyone.

Appearance-wise, she’s a jet black Skeleton. And likely because I used Armor Bear parts, a part of her body had took form of an armor-like shell. There was a single horn like an oni’s on top of her head. Her shoulders and limbs had spikes similar to the Armor Bear, and the black shell looked like it was fused with her bones. She was a size bigger than before, getting up to my chest height-wise.

“Rem-chan, you got bigger. congrats!”

“G A G A!”

Mei-chan sent over some warm words, and Rem seemed to happily nod. Last night when I cast Vile Mud Doll, I sort of understood something. Apparently Rem’s memories, experience and what not are all passed down through the generations. When I make a new Rem, the thing that allows Rem to have independent movement, let’s refer to it as her soul, gets transferred over to the new one as if she got reincarnated. This soul itself stays inside the chaos that manifests when I start making Rem, and the black Skeleton body only acts as a vessel from what I understood.

We weren't with the last Rem for long, but she had fought a ton of Zombies in that short span of time. Her movements had clearly become more adept. If all the growth gets passed down like this, there's nothing better to ask for. Finally, even my curses are getting some convenient cheat-tier functionality.

"Hey hey Momokawa-kun, this thing is really safe right? It won't start suddenly attacking us, right?"

"It's fine, she mostly doesn't have any ego. She's more like a robot that moves only by order"

Uhee, stares Natsukawa-san with a suspicious expression towards Rem. I explained it already, but it didn't seem to work. Well, Rem's a full-on monster on the outside, so this sort of reaction is expected.

"It's called a curse, so you never know when it'll feel like attacking humans"

"When that time comes, my Lux Sagitta will take care of it"

"Now now you two, there hasn't been a single incident where our vocations worked against us so, this should be fine too. I could say my Summon Ice Elemental works similarly to this"

Souma-san and Kenzaki-san on the other hand, are openly wary towards Rem. But rather than the golem, I'm sure it's their distrust towards me. For these two, last night's wanking incident must have solidified their impression of me as a filthy perverted bastard.

Class Rep, please try and hold them back. I wish you the greatest luck.

"Anyway, we should really get going. Asuna, can I get you to wake up Kotori?"

But still, whether last night or now, Takanashi-san isn't waking up at all while everyone's keeps making all this noise... I'm somewhat worried someone might pull a prank on her one of these days.

With the Thief being specialized in using their eyes and ears, we had Natsukawa-san lead while heading back into the depths of the dungeon. Behind our recon, Natsukawa-san, followed Mei-chan and Kenzaki-san, our vanguard warriors. After them are Class Rep, and with Takanashi-san between them, Souma-san. I was at the very rear. Of course, I had Rem protecting my back

after equipping her with proper weaponry like the Iron Spear and Iron Short-sword.

This vanguard-rearguard formation is constructed such that Takanashi-san is in the safest place. Myself being in the very back, I can't say I'm safe in the least. If we're ambushed from behind, I'd be suddenly on the frontlines after all. If Rem wasn't there, I'd probably be insta-killed like in those jump-scare monster movies. And obviously, when we're moving in a row like this, the person at the center would be safest. Even if there's no combat, the guy at the rear could be left behind without anyone noticing, so there's that danger too. I kinda feel like it wouldn't be strange if Souma-san intentionally left me behind after what happened last night. I'll be careful.

"Wuwuh, heyy, are you absolutely sure we're going the right way!? No like, do we seriously have to go in there!?"

Natsukawa-san at the head stops. Naturally, the rest of us follow suit.

"No mistaking it... the magic circle is pointing straight in there"

Class Rep reconfirms. I'm not doubting her, but I quickly check my circle too and, yup, no mistake there.

"I have a bad feeling about this"

"Same here... but we have to pass this, this cave"

That's right, we are currently in front of not the familiar stone passages, but a large cave that looked as if it was forcefully dug through the wall. It's size is similar to the large tunnel-type passages. Being as wide as a highway, it had a ceiling tall enough to pass a large truck through.

Of course, unlike the dungeon ruins, the ground inside was earthen. The place looked tough to walk on. Most striking of all was the absence of light panels.

"Hiee... It's pitch dark in here..."

"We'll be needing a light then"

"It's alright, I'll do my— Summon Lux Elemental"

As Souma-san chants, a white, fairy-like little ball of light, one more, a total of 4 gently fly out.

“Sakura, are you alright using this many?”

“They don’t need to fight, so the mana expenditure is fairly low. And I’m just letting them drift around us, so I don’t need to concentrate on moving them either”

Those sure are convenient lamps. The light elemental things were going here and there, getting closer and farther, all by themselves. Plus, it’s all hands free. I hope my curses can achieve this sort of convenience someday.

“Now, let’s keep going”

With spirited words from Souma-san, we step foot into the eerie cave.

“Heyy, emm, anyone know where this cave ends...”

“Since the circle is showing us, I believe it should connect to somewhere inside the dungeon”

“This cave is clearly different from the architecture inside the dungeon. I don’t think we will get to a fairy square before it ends”

“EEeeeh~, this suucks!”

“Let’s just pray that we get out quickly”

We’ve been 10 minutes inside this suspicious cave. I’m walking quietly, listening to the radio that is the girls in the rearguard. Luckily, it doesn’t seem like they’ll leave me behind anytime soon. There’s Takanashi-san among them, so our durable vanguard has to be considerate and trek at a slow pace. If it’d been just been me, I bet they’d be aiming to get out of here as fast as possible. It’s in places like this that a person’s appeal and standing are tested.

As I kept pondering about the interactions between us cast members, something happened, and Natsukawa-san called out.

“Careful, everyone! There’s something there!”

“Sakura, I need more light. Looks like there’s monsters moving in those side paths!”

With this cave as the root, there were quite a number of small holes branching out like alleyways. We’ve been well aware of them since we came in.

Looking at the construction, I thought just maybe... But it looks like monsters really do come out from there. I'm willing to bet they're the ones who dug out this cave.

"Here they come!"

What came were really large ants. Their height being around that of Rem, a meter and a bit. Alit by the white luminescence of the light elementals, their carapaces shone in ominous black glimmer. As their bodies became more visible, I could clearly discern that they were indeed, insects.

Like insects, they had 6 feet. But only 4 of them stood it on the ground, the 2 in front were raised up, acting like arms. Its posture looked similar to that of a praying mantis. But that loud droning and horizontal mandibles on their heads were uncanny to ants. So, I'm calling them ants.

And much like ants do, these Big Ants also appeared in a swarm. There were coming out one after another in lines from the holes around us.

In no time, there was a forest of ants facing us, making that annoying shrill buzzing as if they were excited to find some appetizing prey. It doesn't look like we can avoid this fight.

"Watch out, these ants might spit acid!"

I shout out a warning to our frontliners, and simultaneously, the battle begins.

Chapter 52: Ant and Mantis

And lucky for us, the Big Ants weren't that strong after all. We had 0 injuries, and they had 20 deaths, making it a perfect victory.

Their black shells weren't as tough as an Armor Bear's and bladed weapons worked well enough. It was harder than a Goma or Red Dog, so Natsukawa-san had to aim for the joints most of the time. The fire from the Red Saber and Red Knife was super effective as well. They were a big factor to our win. We just happened to be equipped with weapons that those monsters were weak to, talk about a lucky break.

Plus, I didn't see any of that acid spit I was worried about either. Our fighter team's weapons had gotten well doused in the Ants' emerald green blood, but didn't look like they were melting or rusting away at all. So I guess these Big Ants don't have any poison? What they also didn't have were any cores, unfortunately.

"Eww... it's soo gross..."

But though we'd won by miles against these Big Ants that were in fact smallfry, I guess girls and the creepy crawlies don't mix in any world.

"Bear it for now, Minami"

"Uuuu, no way... Asuna-chan, you can handle this?"

"Just barely"

"And Futaba-chan, you—?"

"Eh, me? I'm completely fine"

Wow, Mei-chan, you're making me moist. I imagine I'm pretty used to corpses by now, but these gross insect cadavers makes your skin crawl at a whole new level. Even as a guy, I'd rather look away. Souma-san and Class Rep have been doing exactly that as much as possible, and Takanashi-san is in tears already.

Anyway, we made sure to be wary of more Big Ant attacks, and progressed further along the cave— no, I could call it, the Ant's Nest.

But as we go along, I am made to realize my mistake. This isn't an ant's nest, but a Cave of Insects. They come, the come, many other big insects, creeping, crawling, they come.

But well, a majority of those were simple bugs. They didn't have any particular hostility towards us, so were different from actual monsters. Grasshoppers, caterpillars, wood lice, even ones I've never heard of... Swarms of these pests were crawling on the ground around us. Their size would be considered big by normal standards, but they only went upto fist size.

So even if it made you a bit sick, the relief of safety was the more prioritized emotion.

I'm not especially good with insects or anything. But strangely, I'm pretty alright with this. Maybe it's because I've been going through this fierce life-or-death dungeon survival that I can stay relatively calm amongst these large bugs that many people would instantly faint upon sight.

Though yeah, if I happened to see any suspicious ones, my Intuition Pharmacy can tell if it has poison or how dangerous it is. So I can have some peace of mind that way too.

“KyaAAAAAA!!”

Aaand, there goes off another piercing scream provided by Takanashi-san. The reason being: our torches-cum-light fairies were being crowded around by some big moths.

“Not again... I will burn them with my intense light, so everyone get back”

Seriously, why do you gotta do this every time? Wastes time, and mana too. Look there, Mei-chan has moths sitting on her shoulders and isn't even batting an eye. She keeps walking all the same. Yeah I know. It'd be unfair to want that level of iron-heartedness from those girls.

Also, Intuition Pharmacy already told me how these don't have any poison. So they're not something to be afraid of.

After that, we took care of a few more Big Ant swarms, and were progressing steadily. Then,

An ominous hum of wings echoed inside the cave.

“Careful guys, we’ve got a big one... it’s here”

From beyond the loose curve of the cave appeared a mantis. Donned in dark emerald carapace, it had the characteristic long and thin mantis-like shape. But the main point of interest would be its long and sharp scythes. An actual mantis would use those forelimbs to only grasp onto its prey, but this one looks like it would use them to actually slice them apart. Its two scythes were shiny, metallic, and looked extremely sharp.

At around 2 meters in height, it was quite big compared to the Ants. If you count its long and slender abdomen, it would easily cross 3 meters length-wise. With that massive frame, it was buzzing away with its fanned wings, and flew in really fast as if sliding over the ground.

Armed with large blades, plus the high agility of its wings, the Mantis displays more than enough danger to be a threat to our safety.

“Let’s use magic first. Don’t close in carelessly”

“It’d be great if we could finish it with ranged attacks but... If it does end up close, be careful”

Souma-san nocks an arrow of light on her bow, and Class Rep holds aloft her ice wand. The frontliners also draw their respective weapons.

In response, the Mantis raises the both scythes, spreading them in a show of intimidation. Both sides geared for combat. Any moment now, arrows of light and ice will fly, and the fierce battle will— inside all that tension, the hem of my uniform gets a light tug.

“Rem?”

We’re kinda busy here, I think while turning around, whereupon Rem faces behind us, and readies her spear. You idiot, the enemy’s in front of us see? Must be a bug in her programming, is not something I’m so dumb as to presume.

“There’s Ants behind us!!”

Soon enough, we heard that loud droning again coming from the path we’d

left behind.

“Eh?! this is craz—”

“Watch out!”

The Mantis accelerated with shrill noise coming from it's wings, commencing its assault. Souma-san and Class Rep's magic arrows were supposed to launch at this timing, but because I called out to them about the attack from the rear, they lost focus.

Both Souma-san and Class Rep had, for a moment, diverted their attention behind them. But the Mantis had begun moving so they had to shoot anyway. In a hurry, they shot their magics with terribly weak aim. As a result, the light and ice arrows flew in a straight line and made impact only around the Mantis' feet, as if trying to avoid the creature. They didn't serve to stop it, or even slow it down.

But though the Mantis used its new momentum to start its onslaught on our vanguard, I could no longer afford to keep watching the action. The Ants closing in from behind had at last come into visible range.

“Kotarou-kun!”

“I'll do something back here, you handle the Mantis!”

I'm reminded of that recent trouble with the Zombies. It's the same thing again. If I can hold them off until Mei-chan gets rid of the Mantis, it'll be our win.

Big Ants are kinda strong compared to Zombies though.

“Putrefy, in the depths of vile red— Rotten Bog”

What I can do is also the same as before. I can only use Rotten Bog to hold off the invasion. Will this bog really work on these tough-shelled insect monsters? I can only hope. If it doesn't, I'll have to make do with Blackhair Bind.

“Souma-san, support the vanguard, Class Rep, help us here!”

“Eh, but—”

“What the, Momokawa-kun, you can't just give us orders!”

Crap, I forgot. I didn't have even a speck of leadership ability. There's no way they'll simply listen if I ask like Mei-chan would. Souma-san and Class Rep are fully aware of the Mantis in front of them and the Ant swarm behind getting closer by the second. But they're divided between the two and can't make a decision. Or more like, they're almost panicking already.

Goddamn, I don't have the any time to slowly convince them.

"Class Rep, I'm begging you here! Rotten Bog!!"

The first bog I made was on the ground. This one, on the walls. The Big Ants are insects and as such, they can come crawling along the walls just fine. Whether it's 90 degree walls, or the ceiling even, they walk along the surface as if ignoring gravity.

Implying, even with the ground and walls on both sides bog-ified, it won't be enough.

Shit, this is a problem. I need to have my blood stick to manifest the bog. The curse seal on my palms can spray out, but not far enough to reach the ceiling.

Gotta do something, gotta block them somehow, or those Ants will get too close—

"We can stop the ants with Class Rep's wall! Fuck, here goes nothing!!"

Along with some words of persuasion, I shove a hand into my bag of stones that I've yet to use. I take out a small pebble.

As I'm grasping it, I release blood from the curse seal. I would've thought getting a bit of blood on it would be alright, but that's not what happened. Maybe this is an effect of Black Bloodline, but the spat out blood crawled bubbling all over the pebble, fully engulfing it.

I feel like, this is gonna work. With that conviction, I throw the bloodied pebble up towards the ceiling.

"Spread out, Rotten Bog"

Awesome, it worked. As soon as the pebble knocked on the surface, bubbling crimson bog expelled from that center-point and shrouded over the ceiling.

With that, all 360 degrees were wallpapered in poison. And if Class Rep could

raise her Ice Shield on our shore, the defense would be perfect.

“Let’s go Rem! Cover me!”

“Ga Ga Ga!”

Man, Rem’s so cute how she listens so well. Now, let’s show ’em your new powers appropriated straight from the Armor Bear!

I grip my spear and stand together with Rem. At last, the Big Ants have started stepping into my Rotten Bog.

GIIIII! One cries out shrilly.

“Yes! It’s melting!”

My utmost thanks, Ruinhilde-sama. Your esteemed curses have worked swimmingly against these insect curs.

With hard sizzles, the tips of their pointy legs are were melting away. Their posture was slowly crumbling. They kept coming nonetheless, but at the point where they were melted up to the middle of their legs, their bodies finally splashed in. Like those Zombies, the Big Ants also tasted the acid defeat of my poison bog.

“Blackhair Bind!!”

However, the time that Ants needed to melt into complete incapacity was clearly longer than Zombies. Must be their shells. The first one that entered the bog died pretty easily, but from the 2nd after, they were running fast enough to just barely cross it.

Of course, we can’t let them pass or we’re screwed. I’ve been using my Blackhair Bind and Rotten Bog combo to sink the Ants one after another.

But my Rotten Bog can get fully covered with a mere 10 or so Zombies. Compared to human-size Zombies, these Ants with their big frames will fill it up in not time.

“Uaah!? What fell just now!?”

With a huge splash, something black-ish lands in the middle of the Bog. A large volume of acid rose, and almost reached all the way to us. That was close.

Looks like what fell was an Ant with its legs melted. It must have been caught in the ceiling bog. With the legs melted first, its body had only to be released down.

It's great that I could seal off the ceiling route that's hard to defend at, but with Ants falling from above too, the ground bog was being buried in them even faster.

This is bad. At this rate they'll make their bridge of corpses too fast.

"AAah, go to hell!"

"GAGAA!!"

I keep manipulating my Blackhair Binds and also attack the Big Ant that's already come to the edge of the pool. We strike our spears into it in full force, pushing it back into the poison. Rem and I both don't have much muscle to speak of, but we weren't weak enough to fail in taking down something already half melted.

That being said, that right now was too close for comfort. I honestly don't know if we can last another 30 seconds.

"C'mon Class Rep! We're dying heree!!"

"Kuh Pierce, Ice Sagitta!!"

Finally, we got our magic support, now we can win this!

"Ryouko!!"

"You concentrate on supporting our fighters Sakura, I'll help back here— Ice Shield"

In a moment's time, thick walls of ice rose powerfully in front of me. Those Ants overflowing the bog were steps away from the wall. Now stuck behind the shield of frost, they could only uselessly pick at it with their melted legs.

They looked like suffering denizens of hell being punished in the lake of fire. Hahaha, melt away you mongrels.

"Yes, we can do this, we're doing this... now sink! Blackhair Bind!!"

With support fire, plus a reliable barrier of ice holding off the enemy, our fight

suddenly had the tables completely turn to our side. I got excited as hell, and went wild with my blackhair tentacles, while also making good use of my spear.

There were two, three walls of ice raised with gaps between them enough so that the Ants couldn't pass through. Using those gaps, me and Rem dealt the Ants already suffering in acid, a nice helping of spear.

“—Ice Sagitta”

“UOOOOOOH!!”

“GAaAa!!”

And somehow or other, we fought off around 20 or so Ants.

“Haah... haah... I-is it over...”

Yeah, shouldn't have jinxed it.

“GIKlii!!”

A single Ant was attempting to jump over the Ice Shield.

Crap, it's the last survivor. And to make things worse, we killed a lot of them at the pool's edge so their bodies had piled up enough for it to climb and make the jump.

As I'm thinking, it became too late. The Ant was already in front of me.

“GAGAAA!!”

The first one to react was Rem. She went to intercept without so much as a word from me. Really, how upstanding.

“GAH!!”

But Rem doesn't have that much power still. Even if it's only one Big Ant, she isn't strong enough to win in a head-to-head match. No, she'd lose in fact. Rem has her trusty spear on her, but she'd be outnumbered by the Ant's powerful mandibles and two arms 3 to 1.

But as long as I'm here, Rem won't be doing this alone. If it's just one Ant, I can easily bind it up. As long as it's not moving, we don't have to bother anyone else about it. Rem and I can skewer it with our spears.

Souma-san or Class Rep could use their magic... but the Ant is in a really bad position. It practically pounced into the middle of the rearguard, so any close range magic attacks might hit someone. Looks like Class Rep is also troubled whether to shoot or not.

Well then, the best choice in this situation would be to capture it using Blackhair Bind so she can fire at ease. So I didn't panic and calmly invoked the curse.

"Blackhair Bi—ind!?"

"KyaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!"

With that piercing shriek, my curse was disrupted. She slams into me, almost making me fall.

"Kyaaa! Noooo!"

"Uaah, wait, hey, Takanashi-san!?"

The one committing such an act was of course, Takanashi-san. As if she was using me as a shield, I was tightly grabbed from the back and couldn't move as I wanted. And She was shaking me so roughly, neither do I have the calm to cast my curses, nor can I get into position to use my spear. There's a life-threatening monster right there, and we're messing around like idiots.

But as for why this girl, the only person in the party who doesn't play any role in fighting, suddenly panicked so hard after the monster got this close— I really don't have the time for any psychological analyzing right now.

"Let go! Let go hey!! I can't fight like th—"

"Nooo!! Save me! Souma-kuun!"

There's no awesome Hero here dumbass! We can handle a damn Ant without Souma-kun so stop being a pain.

Like, you can just use your Word of Rejection and protect yourself dammit! Why aren't you doing that, stupid idiot!

"L-Let me go dammit!!"

"Kyaa!! Ouch!?"

I forcefully shook her off of me. I may be weak, but I can sure as hell manage something with my strength if it's against the petite and slender Takanashi-san. But in contrast, I can't hold back.

In other words, she bashes hard on the ground. Takanashi-san isn't a sporty girl to begin with, and splendidly failing to break her fall, she fully allowed gravity to do its work. Ouch indeed.

But before I can pity, I gotta do something about this An—

“Ah—”

The Big Ant's sharp forelegs were coming at me full swing. Rem— has her spear stabbed into the Ant's abdomen and giving it her all to stop it from moving. But the Ant's life force isn't weak enough to be deterred by a mere spear.

It's over, I can't stop it anymore.

“GUAah—!”

It was a miracle I didn't die then and there. The two scythes only cut lightly at my left shoulder and below the arm on my right. They're only flesh wounds, but it hurts so bad I want to start rolling on the floor and cry.

No well, try as I might to endure it, I can't fight back at all, so it'd be no use. In its next attack, I won't be so lucky—

“Pile Bunker”

The Ant's body exploded like a water balloon. Pieces of its thick, black, and metallic carapace flew off like it was made of the thin rubber.

“Kotarou-kun, are you hurt?”

Ah, that's right, in the end, Mei-chan's the only one always looking out for me.

“Thanks, you saved me... and the Mantis?”

“It was close, but we beat it”

As I follow the gently smiling Mei-chan's gaze, I see its head removed, both scythes torn off, wings made into shreds. It was the Mantis' gruesomely

massacred corpse. From the results, it would seem like it was a one sided slaughter, but Mei-chan said it was “close”, and both Natsukawa-san and Kenzaki-san look tired too. It must’ve been a tough opponent.

“No wait, Kotarou-kun, you are hurt!”

“Ah, no, it’s ok... stings like hell though”

Yes I’m weak so I can’t act tough forever. Like, it hurts you know? I said it was a flesh wound, but those do hurt. It would’ve gotten into my meat in just a bit more. And Mei-chan who can go, “Kuh!!” and endure stuff like this, is simply too handsome for words.

“Souma-san, can you come heal Kotarou-kun?”

“No, I’m good, my meds can handle stuff like this...”

“No can do, there’s a limited supply of those right? And with magic you can heal up right now. So Souma-san, can you please hurry up?”

“... I will start with Kotori”

Souma-san made a stern face and said. She made a quick glance at me, and quickly started going over to Takanashi-san who was lying sprawled and crying a river.

“Souma-san, aren’t you getting the picture? I’m doing all this so you can atone to Kotarou-kun you know?”

“I’m afraid I don’t see what you mean. Girls should be given priority in treatment, and that is simply what I’m doing”

Awkward silence ensues. Mei-chan’s expression had frozen in that smiling state but... This is dangerous, is what I honestly felt.

“Sakura! Look at that, Momokawa-kun’s wound looks serious. He’s bleeding too, so you should do him first right?”

The one who repaired the broken air was our ever-reliable Class Rep.

One moment later, Souma-san nods.

“... You’re right. I’m sorry, I didn’t see that well”

“Ah, sure... I don’t really, mind...”

Then, feeling an infinite level of awkwardness, I received Souma-san's Healing Light. My first experience of healing magic. It's efficiency was so stupidly good, my ointments seemed like trash in comparison.

Chapter 53: Leader part.1

“—So there was a fairy square, we made it”

In a stroke of good luck, right after overcoming the Mantis onslaught, we passed the cave and safely made it to the following fairy square.

The strain of battle. Additionally, with the psychological revulsion of being surrounded by insects for so long, everyone looked more exhausted than usual. Forgetting any work or words, we all dropped our equipment, and eased ourselves onto the soft grass.

“You too Rem, good work”

“G A G A”

I wouldn't mind if she sat down too. Rem was still holding her spear and standing straight, motionless to my side as I lay on the ground.

“Kotarou-kun, everything alright?”

Mei-chan pops in with a smile. I was lying flat on the ground and she was standing real close to my head and, woah, what the, holy-, I can kinda see it, inside—

“Mei-chan! Yup, none at all, no problem!”

It was a moment's glance. I sit up in a hurry to chase away the visions of pink cloth tucked in those tender, plump thighs. Good Lord almighty, I was this close to being stuck staring.

If I end up adding filthy peeper to my known title of wanker scum, I'll really lose any dignity I have left within this harem party. And if I lose Mei-chan on top of that, I won't have any allies left. Thinking about how absolutely terrifying that is, I can easily overcome the bliss of looking at panties. Life. Life is damn important.

“Souma-san's magic healed me up perfectly”

“Ah, that's good. You know, after you get healed by magic, sometimes the injuries open up again. It's apparently like first aid to only block off the wounds

right away”

“Eh? It’s like that?”

“It is. Kenzaki-san and Natsukawa-san said they experienced it”

Looks like the vanguard members have been exchanging useful info. At present, Souma-san has something close to the worst impression of me, so I can’t carelessly start a conversation with her. If Mei-chan’s doing even a little bit of research on their powers, then I’m super grateful.

Still, I guess healing magic isn’t all-powerful after all. If the injuries are too severe, it won’t work. It may seal them temporarily, but it won’t grant a complete recovery. That could mean that there’s other types of healing magic that are similar to my ointments. That is, they do healing with actual recovery as the final objective.

That’s good. My meds will still have a purpose now. At least, until Souma-san gets that recovery-type healing magic that is.

“Hey, how about lunch?”

Looking at Mei-chan now, no one would dare say stuff like, “Of course you’d suggest lunch”, and make fun of her.

“Sure, walnuts as usual?”

“About that, there’s a little something I need you to look at Kotarou-kun—”

She says as she sits down beside me, and starts rummaging through her bag. Wonder what it is?

“—So it’s this insect, can you see if we can eat it?”

“UAAH!?”

What she took out towards me was, an insect with many thin legs and a red carapace like crayfish. It looked a lot like a caterpillar.

“Its shell kind of looked like lobster, so I thought maybe it was edible... How about it?”

Mei-chan, you really enjoy these exotic foods, don’t you? I could understand eating snakes and such back on Earth, but do you really have to grasp at these

suspicious creatures in another world? She seriously knows no fear man. Someone like her must've eaten puffer fish at least once.[1]

(TN: You gotta eat puffer fish real carefully cause it contains lethal poison. Google-sensei says one puffy has enough poison to kill 30 normies.)

“L-let's have a look see... Ok, no poison, and looks like, there's no other problems eating it either”

“Really!? Awesome!”

“But I think you should at least cook it first”

And wasting time no further, Mei-chan and I started gathering firewood, and made a hearth like we did for roasting snakes. Souma-san and the girls came by to ask what we we're up to, but looking at the Lobster Worm, they turned blue in the face and backed away.[2]

(TN: エビ芋虫 — Ebi Imomushi — Lobster Worm, lit. Lobster Caterpillar)

If Mei-chan can draw out her ideal taste from this, I bet another culinary revolution would transpire among the girls. Speaking of which, even Takanashi-san has been actively pursuing the capture of those snakes. The juicy taste of meat is simply unmatched.

“—And, done!”

“Wow, cool, it's really like lobster!”

At 30 centimeters length-wise, the creepy worm that looked like an animated lobster tail, was now on a skewer. It let out puffs of steam and shone in an appetizing gloss.

Peeling away the shell, its tightly packed, previously clear-ish white meat had solidified to a tasty, solid white after baking in heat. There were even semblances of scarlet stripes going across so I couldn't see it as anything other than a big, roasted lobster tail.

“Well, here goes nothing, Kotarou-kun”

I swallow back my gathering saliva, and carefully watch Mei-chan bring the roasted skewer to her mouth.

“....!? This is-!”

“How is it!?”

The moment of truth. Will it taste like lobster, or will it be worm?

“It’s not that juicy, and the taste is prett-y bland... but it’s lobster alright!”

“All right!”

And thus, we triggered yet another culinary revolution during our time in the dungeon. The Lobster Worm, tasted indeed like lobster. The next time we see these, we’ll be grasping for them like no tomorrow.

“That was great”

We relished the grilled lobster. Saying stuff like, Man, wish there was some soy sauce and mayo, we sit relaxed over the grass, and chat idly. A bit farther away, Souma-san and the girls were gingerly attempting to eat some of the roasted Lobster Worm that we shared.

Incidentally, the one who drew the short straw turned out to be Natsukawa-san. Grabbed in a Nelson hold by Kenzaki-san, her bitter cries as Class Rep inserted the skewered item made me think, she has great potential as an actress.

“Tell me Kotarou-kun... Isn’t it frustrating?”

“Eh, what’s up all of a sudden?”

Mei-chan asked me with a serious expression, but I replied making a stupid face. If you’re talking about frustration, I’m plenty frustrated being thrown into this harsh, life-and-death scenario, but why ask about that now?

“Those girls are bad news. When we were fighting the Mantis, you were almost killed by an Ant, right Kotarou-kun? ... Even when Souma-san and Class Rep, even when both of them were right there”

Her words sounded slightly laced with venom.

“Th-that time... was like a surprise attack, so we just weren’t ready for it”

Since I got to hear that intense dialogue between her and Souma-san, I knew that Mei-chan has quite a bit of dissatisfaction with our clumsiness in that fight.

It didn't turn messy due to Class Rep cutting in, but there's no way she's actually fine with it.

"If they just listened to your orders, there would've been no problem at all"

"But there's no way people will move if I suddenly start ordering them around. I'm not their leader and haven't been approved as one either"

If this was Souma-kun, I bet everyone would very willingly follow his lead even if they were panicking. That's what it means to be approved of. Literally who in their right mind would listen to some unpopular, short, otaku guy from a corner of the class? Not me, I wouldn't.

"Then tell me, who do you think should lead us?"

"Well... If you're asking me, it has to be Souma-san or Class Rep right? There's also Kenzaki-san, but she'd be too busy fighting up front to hand out orders, so not her I guess"

"You know, I really think we should properly decide on a leader with everyone. To be honest, I was thinking this ever since we made a party with them"

Mei-chan's concerns are perfectly valid. You can gather up top-class, powerful individuals all you want, but without any proper teamwork, there will only be disorder. And in fact, with the current ability of our party, we should've been easily able to handle something like a Mantis and Ant pincer attack.

"Kotarou-kun, I think you need to be the leader"

"Eh, no way, that's impossible"

"No really, I know you can do it. That's right, even in the fight just now, if you weren't there, someone like Takanashi-san would've died"

True, I can bet Souma-san or Class Rep would've somehow gotten out of it, but I can't say the same about Takanashi-san. From what I've seen of her, she may have powerful skills, but she certainly doesn't have the ability to make quick decisions and make actual use of them. She may eventually die because of that flaw.

With that powerful Mantis making an appearance, everyone was

concentrated towards it up front, and completely neglected to keep an eye behind. Including me. If Rem hadn't alerted me, I would've lost my chance to manifest Rotten Bog.

"Souma-san and Class Rep, they aren't good enough. Those two don't have the resolve to make a decision that might or might not lead us to death. The only one here who can do that is you, Kotarou-kun"

"No, I mean..."

No way, isn't something I can say. To be perfectly honest, I really want to complain about what was up with Souma-san and Class Rep in that fight.

But, there's a big but. My orders were only good in retrospect. If that Mantis happened to be so strong that they needed both Souma-san and Class Rep's help to get rid of it, then my choice would've been the wrong one. The frontliners would be defeated, the rear then attacked, and we'd face total annihilation, the end.

Then again, we couldn't just ignore the Ants behind us either. With just Rem and me, they would've gotten through, no doubt about it. In fact, one still did. If the Mantis was stronger, it could've come to the point where, I'd have to sacrifice myself to attempt stopping all the Ants alone.

"No listen, it's not like I'll always make the best choice and..."

"I can gladly leave my life in your hands Kotarou-kun. Anything you say, I'll listen"

Mei-chan stares fixedly at me with a smile so charming I'm sent into shivers. With how she said that right in my face, it's like she'd even try doing the impossible if I just ask.

"Yeah. You know Mei-chan, you've been following along with what I said all this time. I ended up giving you orders all the time back then but... I think I finally get how lucky I was being in that position. Thanks, Mei-chan"

"I only did what was right you know? Becoming a Berserker did make me a bit stronger... But that's it, only a bit. I'm always being saved by you after all. And Kotarou-kun, even when that 2nd Armor Bear came, you didn't run, did you? You stayed beside me the whole time right?"

“Well uh, worst case, I’d get eaten and take down the Bear with me... Yeah no, actually, maybe my knees just gave out”

Right. Even after those girls swooped in and saved us, my legs were still gone. I couldn’t even try to stand up.

“No, I’m sure about this. That’s why you have to do it, Kotarou-kun”

Man, this is the kind of stuff you say when you completely trust someone huh. Like, I know we’re having a serious conversation and all, but my cheeks feel a little itchy. My lips might start twitching upwards any second. No, stop that, me. Yeah, I’m super weak to getting praised. An easy catch, if I do say so myself.

“... But me becoming everyone’s leader, that’s still impossible”

“Why”

“You may believe in me, Mei-chan, but the others, all of them don’t. You remember right? What happened when I was going to make Rem? With that one incident, their trust in me hit the dirt”

“But you were just—”

“Class Rep only got them to understand, and that’s still better than nothing. Souma-san and Kenzaki-san were really disgusted you know. The two of them are seriously uptight about that sort of stuff, so they could still be holding in their anger”

On a side note, Takanashi-san seems to be making a shield out of me on a daily basis. I’d be very offended if she had dark intentions like wishing I’d die like that.

“You can’t make someone leader if everyone can’t trust him. Even I can tell that our party is a mess... But if I start getting cocky now, the party itself could be broken apart”

More like, they could just throw me out.

“But I agree with you that we need a leader, at least in appearance. Mei-chan, can you talk to Souma-san or Class Rep, see if any of them want to do it?”

We should’ve decided this from the start. For example, if Class Rep had the awareness that she was leading us, she could’ve given out orders even in that

sudden pincer attack.

And even if we didn't decide, we should've at least discussed and simulated cases of surprise attacks, pincer attacks, or traps.

We may have been granted special powers, but ultimately, we're only students. We aren't trained soldiers or nothing. And this dungeon isn't nice enough to let us off with just relying on our skills.

"Kotarou-kun, are you really fine with that?"

"I don't think we have a choice. It's fine. If we get better as a team, we'll have a little less stress and... Maybe they can find it in themselves to forgive me a little too"

I said to Mei-chan with the best smile in my arsenal. Yeah no, it's not like a smile from me can put someone at ease though. But I'm trying to get the point across that I really am fine with that.

"Huh... I understand, Kotarou-kun"

Being looked at with a slightly worried face from Mei-chan, I thought of myself, kinda pathetic.

Chapter 54: Leader part.2

“... Futaba-san is, acting strange”

Upon confirming that Momokawa Kotarou and Futaba Meiko were happily chatting at another corner of the fairy square, Souma Sakura turned to Kisaragi Ryouko and Kenzaki Asuna, breaking the ice with those words.[1]

(TN: This is a third person narration chapter with a lean towards Class Rep)

“Yeah, I think so too”

“H-hey now, Sakura, and Asuna too... What are you two saying all of a sudden”

Ryouko spoke as if denying their assertions, but truth be told, she was the one most keenly aware of the oddity that was Futaba Meiko. After all, she had seen first hand how the girl was. How she always got flustered, and became completely useless baggage during combat.

“I know I wasn’t good friends with her or anything back in school, but I’m positive that Futaba-san never had a personality where she could ruthlessly kill monsters like that”

“It’s like she’s a different person. And the way she fights... She’s practically going mad”

She would know well. Asuna has been seeing her fight up close in the vanguard. Sakura and Ryouko have also been seeing how Meiko fights from behind in their rearguard position. Using her oversized halberd, she would become a storm of raw power, doing away with Ants one after the next. It was vastly different from the more elegant methods employed by Asuna or Minami. Savage even.

“No well, she is a Berserker after all”

In reality, Futaba Meiko’s true vocation had come to light since the beginning.

That reveal was without a doubt, achieved through the powers of the Sage, Takanashi Kotori.

Eye of Veracity of For a true Sage, man or matter, all is subject to no falsehoods at but a glance[2]

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|Eye of Veracity| |For a true Sage, man or matter, all is subject to no falsehoods at but a glance[/tn]|

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(TN: 真贋の瞳 — Shingan no Hitomi — Eye of Veracity)

It was a power Kotori attained quite recently, and it served to let her know the vocation and skills belonging to others. Like peeking at their Status screens, Minami had described, but her colleagues, being strangers to the world of gaming, wouldn't have much appreciation for such a statement.

At present, Kotori could only see the vocation, and only part of the whole array of skills inside someone. But it is hypothesized that these holes in the information would be filled as Kotori grows as a Sage.

At any rate, the moment Futaba Meiko was seen by her Eye of Veracity, her lie had been completely exposed. Of course, their side had also kept this truth-seeing power hidden, so since both sides were equally exchanging untruths, they didn't press the subject.

“But let's consider the circumstances a bit. She must have changed for the need to adapt”

“Don't you mean, she was changed, by Momokawa-kun?”

“What are you...”

Ryouko's breath catches. Though she attempts to ask, the intelligent Ryouko couldn't possibly not understand the insinuation. That is how terrifying the prediction Souma Sakura had just put to mouth.

“We already know his vocation is Shaman. Like we've seen with his Pain Return, his magic is different from the normal ones like Ryouko's or mine. It's very peculiar to say the least”

“And we’ve got no clue what other nasty curses he’s got hidden away”

“That’s right. For instance... Couldn’t one be, for mind control?”

“No, that...”

“Is possible. You can’t deny that”

A moment of silence governs the scene.

Mind control. For him to have such a bone-chilling magic is... implausible, difficult to believe, but yet, as Asuna said, not impossible. They were in a world ruled by the supernatural existence known as magic. It wouldn’t be strange for any form of magic to exist.

“That may be so... But none of us here, as far as I know, look brainwashed”

“He likely needs to meet specific conditions. Unlike you or Minami, Futaba-san has been alone with him for much longer. He could’ve done anything to her during all that time.”

“We girls can’t let our guard down either, or else he might just go for it”

Momokawa Kotarou was in possession of a mind control curse, and he was silently preparing to bring them all under his domination... Calling this out as idiotic delusion, just wasn’t possible for Ryouko.

And that is no doubt because, she too was extremely fearful of that very same possibility.

“It’s not just her mad fighting that made me think Futaba-san was strange. The most curious thing about her, it’s that crazed obedience towards Momokawa-kun”

“You remember what happened at the fairy square right? Futaba not only didn’t blame him, she even covered for the bastard. I felt it from her, she wouldn’t bat an eye making every one of us her enemy”

“Yes, I really had to hold my breath there”

Haah, emits a pained sigh from Ryouko. As someone who had cut in to mediate, it would be great if she could share her building stress with her two friends even if a little.

“But look, isn’t Futaba-san favoring him over us, completely natural? We know for a fact that Momokawa-kun is her life-savior”

“But, you can’t just—”

“Sakura, Asuna, you haven’t had to abandon anyone yet, so I don’t think you understand. This sense of crushing guilt”

“Ryouko... I’m so sorry, I made you remember something painful”

No, the one who suffered true pain, that is, the pain of being infinitely close to death, was not her, but Futaba Meiko. Ryouko still remembers it hauntingly. That excruciated, sobbing voice echoing from behind as she walked away.

Perhaps Futaba Meiko had indeed died there, alone and helpless. Perhaps the girl they were seeing now, was someone else putting on her name. Perhaps she too was just another golem, the moving doll Kotarou had classified his Rem as, and is able to create using his curses.

However, Ryouko would not let herself descend into the spiral of suspicion like her two friends facing her.

“I personally don’t think we should act so paranoid of them. If these suspicions are wrong... We’d be making a practically irreparable mistake. It’s not something you can wave off with a simple apology”

“You’re, not wrong... I understand. But I do believe we should stay cautious. If Momokawa-kun does turn out to be the type cunning and vicious Shaman we’re imagining, the first one he’d target is the one mentally weak from guilt towards Futaba-san. That is, you”

“Yes, it might turn out just like you described... But, I’m trying my best to believe otherwise”

“Me, I can’t trust one inch of that Momokawa. He’s a bastard that had no problem throwing down Kotori remember?”

She was likely talking about the event where they were ambushed by Ants from behind. Ryouko too had seen Kotori crying, clinging desperately to Kotarou and him unremorsefully shaking her away.

And it is because Kotori was injured by that action, that Sakura had tried

applying healing magic on her first. Like Asuna, seeing Kotarou apparently not concerning himself with the safeguard of a frail girl must have been absolutely loathsome for Sakura as well. Or rather, having beheld her always strong, always kind older brother from a young age, Sakura may have felt the action many degrees harder to forgive.

“About that time, we have our share of responsibility for that too. I don’t recall me or Sakura being able to come to their rescue”

“True. I admit that was our complete blunder. But If we simply listened to Momokawa-kun’s orders back there I, I just can’t...”

“We do it once, and he’d start thinking we’ll listen to his every little whim. Next time, we’re gonna have to avoid that sort of stupidity so, Sakura, Ryouko, one of you should take command.”

Asuna’s way of putting things was overflowing with distrust towards Kotarou from all possible directions. But her mention of them deciding on proper leadership was an opinion needing more attention.

“That’s fair. Yuuto-kun is gone and we’ve been leaving that subject a bit vague. We should work on fixing that”

“Em, so, who are we picking? I’m sure Ryouko being the Class Rep will be perfect for the job”

“Eh, I’m not... If it’s about fighting, isn’t Sakura the better choice?”

“All the same to me. But have a good talk about it you two”

And just as Asuna was about to leave Sakura and Ryouko to decide on the subject amongst the two of them like it was none of her business,

“— Hey there, mind if I join in on that?”

“Futaba!?”

Futaba Meiko had arrived with what seemed to be an eerie grin on her face. The air around her was strange enough that Asuna instinctively brought up her guard.

With a slight glance, she confirmed that Kotarou was lying down on the grass, perhaps taking a nap. Minami and Kotori had been asleep since their meal, and

so weren't participating in their talks.

Recalling their rough battles coming here, their bodies seeking rest upon nightfall simply couldn't be helped.

"So you were listening to us, Futaba-san"

"Something about how it's good if we decide on a leader? I heard a bit of that"

It was lucky she hadn't listened in on the subject matter they were on right before. As naturally it would be troublesome if the individuals concerned heard them, Sakura had chosen a distanced spot from Meiko and Kotarou before starting the discussion.

"Yes, it's about that. We also did a bit of reflecting on the last fight"

"I see. That's great, we're all on the same page then"

"Then let's hear what you got to say Futaba. Thinking to apply yourself as a candidate?"

"Not at all. I'm always fighting up front, and that's not a good position to give orders from, no. It's like that for you too, right Kenzaki-san?"

It seemed like Futaba Meiko had the capacity to judge what consists of leading a team.

"So you do understand. That makes things much faster. I will be completely frank on this then. Futaba-san, between me and Ryouko, who do you think should be the leader?"

Sakura, not too eager to converse, makes a weighted reply. From her tone, it is implied that she shall not allow Momokawa Kotarou to take the position. Now the question is, how will Meiko respond to that iron will?

Sakura and Asuna had an air that they could enter battle any moment. As for Ryouko, the whole affair was causing her great stomach pain.

"Just making sure, but why not Takanashi-san?"

"Sadly, Kotori isn't up to par for this"

An instant answer from Asuna. It is perhaps their close friendship that allows

her such an unreserved opinion.

“Ahaha, that’s one way to put it. She’s the type that just isn’t suited for battle... Yep, totally get it, I was told that too, being sub-par and all”

Kisaragi Ryouko, as cool and collected as she were, had her face dyed in shock at the small comment Meiko added.

“Ah, sorry, I’m not mad about that or anything. It was true after all. It’s all in the past”

Having it told as such with casual movements of the hand and an impish smile that would easily string along men, Ryouko had no words.

“So, do you have your pick, Futaba-san?”

On Sakura pressing her to answer the original question, Meiko looks her in the face and answers as such,

“Ufufu, I’m sad to say, but I’m thinking both you and Class Rep aren’t up to par either”

“... Mind, elaborating?”

“In my mind, both of you aren’t too different from Takanashi-san in that respect. I can’t imagine leaving my life to you”

Meiko made light chuckles, while Sakura sternly lowered her eyebrows. The expression, sparks flying between them, would be a perfect fit to describe the scene.

“Then, if I’m guessing right... You’re thinking Momokawa-kun is the best person to be the leader”

With much reluctance, Ryouko entered the fray.

“And why not? Do you people not get it still, even after that last fight?”

If Class Rep had listened to Kotarou-kun’s instructions, we would all be much happier. If she just listened to him earlier, we could’ve won with more ease.

Meiko speaks as if admonishing a child.

“True, I’ll admit that me and Ryouko weren’t the quickest thinkers during that. But come next time, don’t think that we—”

“Next time? Did you just say that, Souma-san. You should know there isn’t any next time in deadly battle”

I will be careful next time. I won’t make the same mistake a 2nd time.

That moral dogma is essential for students and members of society alike. People make mistakes, reflect on them, and grow as a consequence.

But it is of no doubt that those mistakes are permitted only because those people live in the civilized society of Japan.

Their current location is inside a cruel and unforgiving dungeon. Fierce monsters make it their den, and on top of that, powerful boss monsters lay in wait... It is a miserable survival scenario with zero second chances.

“Hey, tell me I’m wrong but, you girls aren’t thinking this is some sort of game right?”

Meiko speaks further. All of you, you’ve become used to it. I have too. If you just think your enemy is a monster, you can swing your blade without second thoughts, she says.

“You’ve all come fighting for your lives here, I don’t imagine otherwise. You fought monsters where, if you lost, they’d simply eat you... but you didn’t lose. What I’m wondering is, have you even been in any real danger?”

Absolute difference in power. These girls have yet to taste it, the utter despair of having no path left to you other than death. Not only that, they hadn’t suffered any major injury to speak of.

“Complete nonsense. We fought that Cerberus right, I was practically inches to death”

“Yeah, that Cerberus was tough as nails, there’s also that big Goma I had to fight before, that was a close one too”

“But, Souma-kun came and saved you”

“Correct, nii-san would come and save us, any time and any place”

“Hmmm, so it’s fact. Then let’s say, I try killing Souma-san right no—”

Instantly, a naked blade gleams in the light.

A quick-draw in speeds surpassing the eye. Unsheathed without so much as a sound, the sword is pointed directly at Meiko's throat.

"What's the big hurry, Kenzaki-san? You're so on edge"

"Futaba... That was some hell of a bloodlust you had there"

"Bloodlust? Ahaha, that's a good one, is it from a manga? Well, I'm sure it was just your imagination"

"Don't test me!"

Just slightly, Asuna's Blade of Cleansing presses into Meiko's neck. A slight motion and the girl's fair skin would be ruined in red by the razor-sharp blade.

It wasn't an action on the level of a joke. But Meiko was the prime aggressor, is what Asuna, no, Sakura and Ryouko, all three of them were convinced of that.

Bloodlust. Such a thing certainly exists. At least in this magic-driven parallel world, it can be clearly felt. That applies all the more to Asuna, a Dualwielder possessing considerable perceptive abilities.

And having fought alongside her, Asuna also knows that Meiko can feel this bloodlust as well. She has seen the girl conduct herself in battle, sensing the thick bloodlust exuded by monster, much similar to herself.

"Seems like I scared you, sorry about that. But you did get my point right? Right now, Souma-kun isn't here. If I happened to seriously attempt murdering Souma-san... Tell me, will Souma-kun come save you then too?"

"That—"

"Hold that thought Sakura, and calm down... We get it, Futaba-san. You may be right that we've been relying on Yuuto-kun too much. For fighting as well as for mental support"

Ryouko holds back Sakura who had a face telling she was about to burst back in argument. At the same time, sent a glance at Asuna telling to pull back her sword. Her perceptive friend received the message, and quietly returned her blade to its scabbard. Meiko's neck had not one millimeter of a scratch.

"No well, I'm not saying that's a bad thing. Souma-kun is strong right? I get that you'd want to rely on him."

From their stories, it was as if he was guided by fate itself. Souma Yuuto's timing was too good. Like when his sister was attacked by an Armor Bear, like when Asuna and Kotori were cornered by the Boss Goma. And similarly for the Cerberus fight. His timing in coming to their aid, his timing in becoming stronger in a pinch. All of it was superb. Perhaps even sheer luck was a component of Souma Yuuto's powers.

"But if you make that your excuse and do nothing, if you don't put every fibre of your being into survival, I can't forgive you"

"I'm afraid I don't follow. We have been trying to gather everyone under our wing, and together, do our best to find a way to escape this dungeon right?"

"Then what reason, could you possibly have for not accepting Kotarou-kun? Is being under him that hurtful to your pride? Because you consider him to be below you? You're against listening to a man weaker than you that much? Or maybe, you just don't plan on listening to any man you don't love?"

This isn't the place to be finicky over trivial things. It's all about the resolve to survive, even if you have to crawl through mud. No, you don't need resolve, just do it.

"Kotarou-kun is truly weak. But, in spite of that, he knows the way to survive. If he doesn't know, he can imagine one. That's not something me or Kenzaki-san who only rely on our strength can do. And the helpless and afraid me from back then, or say Takanashi-san now, can't do it either"

Something that the Hero Souma Yuuto who, granted substantial strength and blessed by lady luck, simply can't do. Not relying on miracles, and using every method available to him to grasp at a means of survival.

It was likely only Ryouko who thought she was implying as such. A sort of consideration on Meiko's part for not explicitly mentioning Souma Yuuto.

"Hey, how about it, I'd really appreciate it if you listen to him just a bit. There's no need to worry, Kotarou-kun doesn't ask for anything impossible, and always takes care of you. See, he even took someone like me in, and—"

"Cut the crap"

Asuna cut into Meiko's plea with precision.

“Asuna!”

“Yeah, got it Ryouko. Futaba has a point, is what you wanna say right? I got a good idea what she’s getting at”

If you do, then what’s with all this? Questions Ryouko.

“Call it emotions-based, or whatever. But I can’t, in no damn way, bring myself to trust Momokawa. Can’t imagine leaving my life to him, I’ll hand those words right back at you, Futaba”

“... I’ll ask why if you don’t mind”

Not giving an inch to Meiko’s unnaturally expressionless face, Asuna boldly makes her say known.

“There’s the incident in the square, and the time when he pushed away Kotori, those would be more than valid reasons... But I’ll give it you straight. I have no plans on ever obeying someone weaker than me”

“You mean that, as a woman?”

“Nay, as a swordsman of the Kenzaki Style!”

Laughter had not ensued following Asuna’s statement. Rather than not fitting the times, it gave the feeling of something a samurai-crazed otaku would cringe-indusingly say. In modern Japan at least, you ordinarily wouldn’t find people other than individuals of those tastes speaking like this.

But because they are so close, Souma Sakura and Kisaragi Ryouko know what truly consisted of the girl, Kenzaki Asuna. They know she wasn’t ordinary in the least. They know of her grueling lifelong training under the sword, and they understand how her this stern mindset of hers has been molded as a result.

“Hmm, more good facts. That means, if I were to be stronger than you, you’d obey me without question?”

“If you win a one on one duel, I don’t care if it’s you or Momokawa, I’ll pipe up and follow”

“Yup, wonderful. This makes things very easy— A duel, let’s do that”

Suggests Futaba Meiko in light-hearted tone as if making a promise to go

shopping later.

“Hold it right there! You can’t, no wait, aren’t you being insane!?”

“Don’t stop us, Ryouko. I’m perfectly sane, and also very serious”

“Oh yeah. There’s that time when Kenzaki-san decided to get engaged to Souma-kun because she lost a duel, right?”

Kenzaki Asuna makes important decisions via duel. Such precedent already exists. Everyone in their class knows this. No, the turmoil of her engagement with Souma Yuuto was already known as a great legend among all in Shiramine Academy.

“Ryouko, when Asuna gets like this, you know there’s no stopping her”

“But that’s no excuse to... This isn’t the time to start infighting...”

“I’m really sorry Class Rep. But Kenzaki-san’s saying she won’t settle on a compromise if we don’t do this. I don’t think there’s any option apart from this if we want to become true comrades”

Ryouko practically wanted to cry when the one who accepted that duel, the perpetrator herself, started consoling her. Or rather, her eyes were feeling moist already.

“Asuna, Futaba-san, you two are sure about this right?”

“Yeah, if Futaba defeats me, I’ll give in to her demands”

“If Kenzaki-san wins, I won’t bring up making Kotarou-kun the leader anymore”

Well I can’t really make you promise so we have the loser absolutely obey the winner or anything, continues Meiko, but Asuna accepts anyway.

“You’re not a swordsman or anything. So I’m fine with those conditions”

Meiko doesn’t have one clue as to what Asuna consider being a true swordsman, but their negotiations thus conclude.

“Please tell me you aren’t planning to use real weapons in this”

“The winner loses if the loser dies, that goes for both of us”

They obviously hadn't lost all their good sense. But for Ryouko's own peace of mind, she needed to confirm anyway.

"Then do we go empty-handed? Ah but Kenzaki-san is a Dualwielder so, uhmmm, we could use fairy walnut tree branches as wooden swords (bokutou) right?"

"I don't mind it bare-handed, but with some form of weapon, I don't think either of us will regret anything"

Both of them would find it annoying if the other complained she lost because she didn't have a weapon.

"Please don't get hurt... or not I guess. It'd be great if you keep it to a level Sakura can heal"

And that was all Ryouko could say.

Thus it came to be that Futaba Meiko and Kenzaki Asuna would duel with their convictions on the line.

Chapter 55: Kenzaki Asuna

“Hmm, more good facts. That means, if I were to be stronger than you, you’d obey me without question?”

“If you win a one on one duel, I don’t care if it’s you or Momokawa, I’ll pipe up and follow”

“Yup, wonderful. This makes things very easy— A duel, let’s do that”

Never did Kenzaki Asuna think she would propose a duel of all things to a woman.

She had the awareness that she carried sensibilities far too different from the ordinary high school girl. There was even a time she was troubled by the fact, but after entering high school and at present, she had made her resolve.

That, she wasn’t any ordinary woman. That she was a swordsman of the Kenzaki Style.

That is why, Futaba Meiko who, despite being a woman, knew not any fear in combat, was an existence very alien to her.

No, let us say that considering their situation and being given their vocations, their powers for engagement, the girl managed to attain the psyche necessary to voluntarily seek battle. Kenzaki Asuna’s common sense wasn’t something you could write off as mere individuality in peaceful Japan. But she, Meiko, a normal girl, had also reached a similar state of mind having experienced deadly dungeon life. And in fact, even Natsukawa Minami, who was simply a girl from track and field team, had also grown to a level where she could fight equally alongside Asuna.

But having gone so far as to challenge her to a duel, Futaba Meiko was just outlandish compared to them. Was this incongruity a result brought about by her carrying the fearsome vocation of Berserker, or could it truly be a consequence of Momokawa Kotarou’s deviant brainwashing?

Asuna didn’t care either way. They have promised to duel, so she would face the challenge with her pride on the line.

“— Ready yet, Futaba”

“Yeah”

The pair had come to an open area found very close after exiting the fairy square. Similar to the place where Kotarou and Meiko fought the Armor Bear, it was an empty lot with practically nothing of interest. There was the concern that monsters could barge in anytime, but both of them wished to withhold from engaging in the middle of the fairy square.

They did make a quick surveillance of the surrounding passages to ensure a level of safety. The fight won't last very long so it would only serve as insurance.

“Then, let's go”

Present are only the two, Meiko and Asuna, the ones who would duel. They had declined any referee.

Kotarou, Sakura, Class Rep. They would be hard pressed to call upon any of them to stay neutral. Should they be stopped at a bad time, it would give rise to dissatisfaction. Thereupon, they made sure to be alone so as to have no unnecessary interference.

They stood at a distance equal to that used in a normal kendo match. Owning the name of Dualwielder, Asuna held a wooden sword in each hand. In contrast, Meiko carried just one, of extra-large size and having a flattened bat shape. Both swords used fairy walnut branches as material and were manufactured by Takanashi Kotori after they forced her awake to make them.

Their duel was not one fulfilled by the forfeit of life, but one that challenged their credo. That is why, this too would serve to prevent any sore losers, as both of them were provided adequate arms.

Although for the sleepy-head Kotori, she wasn't happy at all being made to make wooden swords for god knows why.

Whatever the case, all preparations were set, and at long last, the duel between Kenzaki Asuna and Futaba Meiko kicked off.

“I'm good anytime”

“Alright... Ready, set, MATCH!”

Asuna was by no means making light of Meiko. Her battle prowess had reached levels so forceful and barbaric you could compare her to real war generals from the Sengoku era. In many a kendo tournament, and even informal matches, Asuna had faced these types of rough-and-tough individuals... but Futaba Meiko, a Berserker's pressure, was a first even for her.

In fact, as long as she carried her vocation, Meiko would be stronger than anyone in their original world. Her athletic prowess would easily surpass even the most excelling rangers from the SDF.

It was a of level of monstrous strength utterly unattainable by any ordinary human being... A level also applicable to Asuna.

Right now, I'm leagues stronger, stronger than father (otou-sama) , and even stronger grandfather (ojii-sama) at his peak.

Her skill with the sword needed no mention, just the strength dwelling in her body could thwart any challenge of technique.

Thus Asuna and Meiko both wielded constitutions surpassing man. That being the case, only their ability would determine the stronger.

Futaba Meiko had precise control of her abilities as Berserker, and could put those abilities to practice in battle. Her courage and spirit too were electrifying. But Asuna had also survived the same dungeon, tasting more than enough experience from combating monsters. Experience-wise, the difference between them would be negligible.

That being so, Asuna was convinced that herself, having learned the sword from a tender age, would have a deciding advantage.

"Hmhmh!"

So just as the match started, Meiko threw her sword, perhaps an attempt to surprise her, but she handled it with ease.

There was no cause for alarm after all. The average kendo club-goer would likely get startled, but as a swordsman of the Kenzaki Style, Asuna had experience in matches against members of other Schools of teaching, and per consequent, was used to such surprises. Those called swordsmen may throw a dagger or two, and if they were studied in ninja arts, shurikens and kunai were

much common.

She would normally repel such projectiles, but anticipating the sheer power behind a sword thrown by a Berserker, Asuna didn't divert it like she would a shuriken, and chose to dodge.

As Asuna nimbly side-stepped out of the way, Meiko had already become charging in. They were not particularly distanced in the first place, and considering her mighty leg strength, the span between them would be closed in an instant.

But precisely judging that speed was well within the abilities and experience of Asuna.

Assessing that the sheer momentum to be too much to stop, she spurred another side-step.

“And—”

Meiko passes her by a hair's breadth. Upon her successful evasion, Asuna faces Meiko's wide-open back, and strikes down both her swords.

“—I'll end this!”

No holds barred. Asuna acknowledged Meiko as worthy opponent she would need to go all out against. She approximated that the damage just now would cause her a swift collapse, being unable to stand for a while. But with Souma Sakura's healing magic, she should be fixed up fast.

Feeling her hits land true, Asuna was sure of her victory when,

“HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!”

The mad beast bore her fangs.

“Wh—”

As if the total damage dealt to her back equaled a lump sum of zero, Meiko swerved herself around, and pounced at Asuna right after she brought down her swords.

Seeing the girl move as if the attack hadn't even struck, and then faced with an instantaneous counter-attack, even the ever perceptive Asuna had her work

cut out for her.

But with a back-step, she just barely made it. He had escaped being caught by Meiko's arms by a paper-thin margin—

“Kuh!?”

And there, Meiko threw the sand she had in her grasp. When did she pick it up? Or did she have some from the start? Whichever it may be, the critically timed smokescreen forced Asuna to dodge yet further relentlessly.

Fully spinning herself around, she prevented the sand from robbing her vision, but that was all she could manage.

“Ah—”

Her arm was caught.

“You can't kill me with sticks”

Seeing Meiko's grin, Asuna finally realized. Duel: A ritual that guarantees preservation of life. Wooden swords: weapons that don't kill. Under these conditions, Meiko's triumph had been set in stone.

Asuna had presumed that the match would end upon whoever made the decisive hit. However, Meiko acted under the rule that whoever defeated the other would win the fight.

Asuna's moment of assuming victory as her sword landed on target was, precisely what Meiko aimed for. She never thought she could otherwise catch Asuna, who had a plethora more experience over her.

“HAa!!”

She hears Meiko's yell and, her vision inverts. The next moment, a piercing impact runs the length of Asuna's back. She had been thrown down using the same hand that was grabbed. There was an attempt to break her fall using her free hand, but that proved futile versus the sheer momentum with which she was slammed into the ground.

“Kha, Ha...”

She felt as if all the air in her lungs burst out. In severe pain all over her body,

Asuna simply wanted to gasp in some air,

“Hmph!”

But just as she was about to, the tip of Meiko’s foot bore into her stomach. As if she was a soccer ball. Without the slightest mercy or hesitation, the kick exploded in Asuna’s slender and toned abdomen.

Her body made bent in a V as she was flung away. Asuna rolled on the ground, groaning from the fierce pain assailing her insides. She was giving it her all, just so the stuff that was already at the base of her throat wouldn’t come flooding out.

But the merciless hammer that is Meiko’s foot, lands there once more.

“Bu-, ughee—”

Copious amounts of blood-mixed vomit escapes Asuna’s orifice of intake. Her once gallant face was now warped in pain, excreting semi-digested waste. Meiko looked down on that display with cold, disdainful eyes as if she had seen a squashed cockroach.

“Tell me Kenzaki-san, does it hurt?”

Her dim, hazy consciousness somehow heard Meiko’s question crystal clear.

“Guh, uu... W-what, do you...”

“I’m asking you if it hurts”

“Th-this much pain... is nothing...”

Her vision goes black. It lasts only a moment, and upon regaining sight, Asuna tastes iron on her tongue. Pain along with stuffiness in her nose.

Her face was kicked. Blood flowed from both nostrils, further defiling Asuna’s beautiful visage.

“How about now?”

“Uu, n-nothing...”

“Not enough it seems”

This time, the face and stomach, both kicked. Asuna was smeared in dirt as

she rolled, and then fell collapsed. But Meiko didn't ask her again. She kept on kicking Asuna as she rolled further along the lot much like a dribbling soccer ball.

"Hah, Aa... W-wait, stop... loss, my loss..."

"Why, aren't you slow, Kenzaki-san. Don't you think we already know who lost? What I'm asking you, is if it hurts or it doesn't"

Her foot is slowly raised over Asuna's head. What would happen once she stomps down on the sole of that shoe in her view? Asuna didn't even want to imagine the ensuing pain and humiliation.

"Hii... Just, please just stop... hurts, it hurts alright..."

The dignified visage of the swordswoman had wholly degenerated into the face of a girl, terrified. And seeing that, as if satisfied, Meiko spoke.[1]

(TN: I saw swordswoman here because they specifically make the distinction in the raws.)

"You're spot-on, Kenzaki-san. When you punch and kick people, it hurts. It's very, very painful and scary. That's why violence is bad"

It was a gentle voice, like a kindergarten teacher reprimanding children involved in a fight.

And having done saying that, Meiko's raised leg was mercilessly stomped down on Asuna's face.

"GAaah!?"

"Do you see, Kenzaki-san? This, is violence"

Having completely broken Asuna's nose, Meiko continues to speak as the girl writhes in pain.

"But see, humans are creatures than get used to violence. We're really quick to take up violence for ourselves, and in time, we even learn to desire using it"

The reason is simple. It grants you pleasure on an instinctual level. Control. Conquest. The sense of supremacy over others. And sometimes, using violence to enact justice. Unilateral violence truly grants a many forms of catharsis.

“Pride of a swordsman? Won’t obey the weak? Don’t make me laugh. That’s nothing more than nonsense you made up because you think you’re strong enough to use violence”

You have pride because you are strong. You can look down on the weak because you are strong.

“Saying you’re a Kenzaki Style swordsman and stuff, poor you, Kenzaki-san. You’ve been training since you were small right? So much that you could even compete with Souma-kun despite being a girl”

Kenzaki Asuna is certainly strong. The duel concerning her engagement to Souma Yuuto was a close match. Asuna’s sword skills were above and beyond him. But Souma Yuuto, fully utilizing his dominance in strength being male, along with his the martial arts (taijutsu) of the Souma Style, he barely managed to score victory.

It was a fierce match where Souma Yuuto wouldn’t have won unless he gave it his all.

“There’s where you got your little misunderstanding. You used your pride as a just cause to inflict your own brand of violence. Yet you never knew how scary true violence is—”

This time, it wasn’t her foot, but Meiko’s whole body that descended. A mounting position so to speak.

Though she had since lost weight, the stout build that possesses the title of tallest amongst all of Class 2-7’s female students plopped itself all at once on Asuna’s stomach. She gasped hard from the intense pressure.

“— So, I’ll just have to teach you”

Having a smile so serene you would think she was a holy woman, Meiko took her tightened fist, and bashed it into Asuna’s wretchedly wounded face.

It was violence beyond the irrational.

Kenzaki Asuna, a girl who had continuously and rigorously trained in the sword, for the first time, experienced violence just for the pure sake of it.

“Aah!”

“This pain, is Kotarou-kun’s pain”

She was supposed to have become used to pain.

Bruising and body blows were daily. She had suffered fractures from intense training. Once, having a wooden sword stabbed in her eye during a match, she had even experienced nearly losing half her sight.

But all that would only be considered dangerous, never scary.

In practice and in bouts, anyone who got injured received swift treatment. Even her father, as strict as he was, when Asuna got injured, he would go blue in the face and come running.

Yes, Kenzaki Asuna was loved. Loved as a matter of fact by her whole family that ran a swordsmanship dojo, and even loved by the pupils of said dojo. The opponents of other schools she faced, even they would garner respect and awe for the single daughter who would inherit the Kenzaki Style.

There was pain, and there were injuries. But there was never fear.

“Ah, Ghah... S-sto...”

“This fear, is Kotarou-kun’s fear”

Unending is the storm of violence. The fists kept landing on her without pause.

You’re a girl, so don’t injure your face. Her father had warned as she would charge her opponent with no concern for injury. It was a memory from, perhaps, when she was 10 years old. That stringent father who would always, only teach his daughter sword techniques was, despite himself, caring for her. As a child, she was surprised by such an act, but yet, slightly happy.

Kenzaki Asuna is a swordsman, and at the same time, she is a woman. As a result, she grew up with a face strewn in dignity that would make anyone glance twice.

But that beautiful face was currently being destroyed by the Berserker’s relentless violence.

“Do you see, Kenzaki-san? You did something this terrible to Kotarou-kun”

Asuna's vision blurs in crimson.

"Apologize"

The raised fist reflecting in her eyes stained scarlet was dreadful beyond belief.

"Apologize to Kotarou-kun"

Pain. Pain. She's in so much excruciating pain, but why doesn't it stop?

"Don't do bad things to Kotarou-kun"

Please stop.

"Don't hurt Kotarou-kun"

Please save me.

"From now on, just be quiet and listen to what Kotarou-kun says"

In her flickering conscience, Asuna realizes that the drizzle of fists had finally stopped.

Ah, finally. It finally stopped. I survived.

"Since you lost Kenzaki-san, you lost the duel, after all"

It's fine, losing or whatever. As long as I'm released from this fear, this pain, anything is fine.

"Go on, say it"

"... I, I am, sorry... It is my loss..."

I really apologized, I admitted my defeat, so, please stop. Stop, please. Why, just stop, why, HELP, NOO— Please don't hit me.

As her inner voice describes, Meiko's upraised fist descended in a final, solid punch.

The blunt noise echoing into her skull must be the sound of her heart breaking. Her prideful, swordswoman's heart, tempered like a fine katana, was shattering into tiny pieces.

Asuna's consciousness then finally sinks into darkness, wholly despair-bound.

“Ahaha, I did it, Kotarou-kun. I won the duel with Kenzaki-san. Fufu, I hope you’ll be happy~”

Chapter 56: Revolt

Author's preface (paraphrased):

So it's about last chapter where he apparently wasn't very accurate with the location and things and has since then made the revisions. Though I personally think these things are pretty obvious now... I'll slightly paraphrase what he says here:

1. Mei-chan and Kenzaki's duel happens in a different place from the current fairy square and with only two of them there.
2. It's not the place where they fought the Armor Bear.
3. Souma Sakura and Class Rep were on standby at the square and were not at the duel location.
4. Kotarou, Natsukawa Minami and Takanashi Kotori were all also at the fairy square, fast asleep, and didn't know about the duel.

"KYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!?"

And, with the usual Takanashi-san scream ringing in my ears, I jumped awake in a big hurry.

"UAAhh!? What, enemies, where!?"

I keep restlessly looking around, but there's no monster in sight. It's the same old fairy square, and the not so same old, new party members. I was napping on the side of the fountain opposite to our girl's area, where the denizens are currently making a racket. They say even three makes a crowd, but the scream just now gave a more emergency-y feeling. The biggest noise came from Takanashi-san, but Class Rep and Natsukawa-san also had similar reactions.

Yeah, something's definitely up.

"Uhm, 'scuse me, something happen here? Everyone alri—"

I attempted to ask calmly, but those words froze solid in my mouth when I saw that.

"Ah, Kotarou-kun. I did it see, I had a duel with Kenzaki-san and won!"

Now she'll listen to every word you say, she happily declares the girl's slave status, but her words kept going into one ear and out the other.

Mei-chan sported a jolly smile as she nonchalantly pulled along Kanzaki Asuna like a bag of trash.

Grabbed by the nape, the girl's limbs were powerlessly spread asunder. They didn't even twitch, as if she was already a corpse. What's worse, she looked so awful, you could call her a victim of gruesome ultra-violence.

Her face was beaten to a pulp. In more precise terms, completely fucked. It was way passed the level of being beaten black and blue, and had devolved into a swelling mass of red and gore. There was nothing left of her, Kanzaki Asuna's beautiful, dignified visage.

"Ah, Asuna... no..."

"God, how horrible..."

I'm not the only one swallowing his breath seeing the drastic change in Kanzaki-san, Souma-san and Class Rep were the same. Natsukawa-san and Takanashi-san couldn't even voice out. They were just huddled together, shaking like a pair of small animals.

"What is it, something the matter? Ah, I bet you're worried about Kanzaki-san? Ahaha, relax relax, she's just a little fainted is all—"

With a cute Ei, Mei-chan lopped Kanzaki-san's body as if she was throwing away an empty beverage can. It was as if she was handling not a human being, but an object.

The girl's body rolled like a piece of bulky garbage, and stopped right around Souma-san's feet.

"Here you go, Souma-san, you should really get to the healing her"

Souma-san was in a daze, just looking at Kanzaki-san and didn't seem to show any signs of using her healing magic. Does she not understand the situation? Or is it that she can't bear to believe this atrociously disfigured girl is actually her close friend?

"— Kanzaki-san!"

Snap out of it woman. Kenzaki-san is in a dire condition. If we don't do something soon, it won't just be scars, she might end up with permanent brain damage too.

She probably had her face pummeled over and over. And not by just anyone, but by Mei-chan who wields a pair of ferocious Berserker fists. I bet I wouldn't last even one of those punches.

I ran towards Kenzaki-san's motionless body while taking out one of the palm-sized sacks of Ointment A, that I had prepared beforehand, from my pocket .

Upon closer inspection, Jesus, this is worse than I thought. I kind of want to look away. But it looks like she's breathing, and I got a pulse from her wrist too. She looks plain dead from the outside, but like Mei-chan reported, she's only unconscious.

But that clearly doesn't mean we can relax. I shove my hand into the sack and, with a solid chunk of ointment on my fingers, fingers shaking from tension and unrest, I gently begin applying it on her face.

"Souma-san! Healing magic, quickly!"

"Eh, Uh..."

"Just do it before too late! Do you want her face to have lifelong scars!?"

After she got back to her senses from my desperate yelling, Souma-san put together her hands as if praying, and began a magic incantation that I couldn't quite hear.

"Please let this heal her— Healing Light!!"

A faint, gentle radiance envelops itself around Kenzaki-san's head. And, as to be expected from a Saintess' healing magic, the severe swelling wells down right before our eyes, and for now, her face regains a state where you can at least look at it without wincing.

But it's a fact that Healing Light will only temporarily reverse injuries, so I need to use my ointment too. Since, once the magic wears off, her scars will come right back up. Full recovery should take a bit of time, that is, if my Ointment A does its job properly, she should be good in less than a day.

“Haaah...”

Having finished all the treatment I could, I let out a dreary sigh, and very nervously, raise my head to look at Mei-chan.

“Huh? K-Kotarou-kun...?”

Her face is what I could describe as bewildered. Honestly, I’d describe my face the same.

Having seen Kenzaki-san roughed up to such a degree didn’t make me go, “Ahaha, serves you, violent bitch!”, in fact, it didn’t make me happy at all. I can’t even pretend to smile having made to see something so horrible. I can tell that my face is currently very tense, my eyebrows furrowed in anger.

“The hell did you do this for!”

This is the first thing I need to ask. If I heard her right, it was something about having a duel with Kenzaki-san and then something about winning said duel. I have no idea how, and in what possible way, this could come about.

“Eh, huh, whut... You’re not, happy?”

“Course I’m not happy!!”

“Ah, Uhm, I... I’m sorry... I was thinking for your sake, and... Kotarou, kun, sorry...”

Shit, I got impatient and my words got rough.

I don’t see the gist of what she’s saying. Was my reaction that wierd for her? I admit that I had a bit of a grudge, but don’t tell me she thinks I’m the sort of scum who’d be happy to see a girl beaten to the point of breaking for such a small reason?

Ah, fuck it. There’s way too much going on, and I can’t think straight at all. Mei-chan looks like she’s gonna cry, no wait, there’s already tears forming at the edges of her round eyes. Everything’s a damn mess.

Like seriously, I’m the one who wants to cry. Mei-chan one-sidedly beat up Kenzaki-san. This whole situation is going in a direction where the damage in our party-member relations will become completely irreparable.

“I get it, it’s fine, it’s alright Mei-chan. Don’t worry. You don’t have to force yourself to explain, so relax”

“B-but, but I... I just, wanted to... Uuu...”

Man, this reminds me of the time we first met in the dungeon, wait, fuck, I gotta stay focused on reality now. Anyway, I gotta know what happened, or else I wouldn’t know how to deal with it.

“Uhm, so Class Rep, you know what happened?”

“... Right, I’ll explain Momokawa-kun”

“Wait! No, I mean, I really was, thinking for Kotarou-kun and—”

“It’s alright, I know that, so don’t worry okay, Mei-chan? And you did it for my sake right? So thanks”

It seemed as if her shaky hands were going to grab onto Class Rep any moment now, so I quickly took Mei-chan’s hands myself. I hold onto those fair, slender hands that you wouldn’t imagine can punch a hole into an Armor Bear. They’re so warm. Despite the mess we’re in, I got a bit excited holding a girl’s hands. This is pathetic.

“K-Kotarou-kun...”

Ultimately, Mei-chan bursts into wretched sobbing, and while I console her saying that it’s okay, I turn my gaze towards Class Rep, seeking her testimony of the truth.

“Sorry. If I only knew it’d turn out like this, I should’ve stopped them even by force... Listen Momokawa-kun, the one would brought up the duel was actually Asuna—”

From there on, Class Rep told me everything.

How they were also discussing that they should decide on a leader. How Mei-chan then entered the fray and fervently declared that I be the one truly deserving the title.

How, when they were thinking her opinion also had some value, Kenzaki-san strongly opposed. Saying she wouldn’t obey anyone weaker than herself and what not. What prideful warrior are you pretending to be here? I wanted to

retort, but knowing Kenzaki Asuna, she's the type of person who'd totally say that.[1]

(TN: I wanted to paraphrase the retort into What are you, Vegeta? but I refrained lol.)

As for what happened after, I could call it one side bringing on the heat, and the other side bringing their own. Mei-chan was like, Then I'll just win and make you listen, and accepted her challenge to settle things with a duel. Kenzaki-san then went out with her, full of confidence— which leads us to now.

“Jesus... you, can't make this shit up...”

I can only sigh. The story is just too nonsensical. It's so damn hot-blooded, you'd think they're characters in a battle manga from one of those weekly shonen magazines. On top of that, you got girls doing this shit. Literally makes no sense.

Like, fights between girls, aren't those more like, putting thumbtacks in the other one's shoes, or dousing them with a bucketfull of water when they enter the toilet, or like, spreading rumors that they do compensated dating(enjou kosai) . Things that are 10% physical and 90% psychological damage right? Then how come it's one hundred frickin' percent physical here!

“I feel so terrible about this. I knew it wouldn't end well, but despite that... I should've just stopped them, whatever it took”

“No Class Rep, don't take it as your own responsibility”

I honestly think it was karma, though Souma-san would probably complain about that. Sure, Mei-chan's the one who brought up talk of duels, but knowing the Kenzaki Asuna's character, you could say she was revved up for it already.

I'm sure she had the resolve. A wound or two. She should be well aware that matches like these aren't fun and games. And having watched Mei-chan fight, seeing her Berserker strength, I doubt she thought of her as an easy opponent.

But despite that, she consented to the duel. The result bringing severe wounds on top of losing was but another possibility among the many. Win or lose, one of those was bound to happen. And I don't think Kenzaki-san's the type of trash who'd only play when they're guaranteed to win and set up a

rigged duel. This isn't like n00b-hunting in a fighting game.

She made all that resolve and lost, so she should just accept the resulting wounds. Then, as promised, she should obey whatever Mei-chan says. Like a slave. Since that's what she, Kenzaki-san, made her bet on.

And I'd be insane to expect everyone to accept something like that. Seeing her state, I also honestly felt it. That it was too far.

"Uuu, uuu... I'm so sorry, Kotarou-kun... I never thought, it would..."

"It's ok, you said all that thinking of my, no, everyone's future"

From then on, for a little longer, the fairy square was all silent, except for Mei-chan's quiet sobbing.

"— Let's have Class Rep be our leader"

This is the main cause of it all: who the leader should be. In an attempt to put an end to the matter, I break the silence.

"Eh, but I... Momokawa-kun, are you really alright with that?"

Class Rep is plainly flustered. As for Souma Sakura, maybe she thought I'd appoint myself, her face is also dumbfounded.

Natsukawa-san and Takanashi-san, they couldn't really follow the conversation in the first place, and were still huddling close and shaking a bit.

"I think everyone would want either Souma-san or you to be leader. It doesn't matter either way right?"

"Well, more or less..."

"Yes, that's right. There wouldn't be any problems with either of us becoming leader"

"Then, I'll be voting for Class Rep"

Leaving out the two candidates, if Kenzaki-san, Natsukawa-san, Takanashi-san, and Mei-chan all say "Either way is fine", then the deciding factor rests on me and Mei-chan. I really don't think Mei-chan will disagree with me come this far, so in essence, we have two votes in Class Rep's favor. With that she has the majority vote and we're done.

“I will go ahead and ask, why pick Ryouko?”

“I guess it’s because there’s still a bit of miscommunication between me and you, Souma-san... You don’t seem to trust me very much”

In other words, “Bitch, you just hate me”, something like that. But there’s no point in aggravating her by saying that. Especially when you’re super weak like me.

“True, I don’t have much faith in you Momokawa-kun. However, I am not the kind of person who would openly discriminate against someone for such a reason. It’s regrettable you think so of me”

Yeah, I guess she’d have to be clinically retarded if she couldn’t guess what I meant. Souma-san looked somewhat offended.

“Souma-san, It’s not like I’m doubting your character or anything, but Class Rep’s been covering for me for a lot of stuff these past few days. So I’d obviously pick her as leader”

Between Souma-san and Class Rep, there’s no need to consider who I trust more.

Tell the truth, I think my relationship with Souma Sakura is broken beyond repair. She is good as a person. But a severe stuck-up. And to top it off, emotional as fuck. Once she hates someone, she’s merciless. She’d be the first to outcast me given the chance. Or else, she could even subconsciously order me to take a position where I’m sure to die.

On the other hand, Class Rep is much more of a safe choice. She’s impartial to all, and would even have my back— Well no. I’m not gullible enough to actually think that.

The reason she’s been covering for me is all because of her guilt towards Mei-chan and nothing else. Seeing Kenzaki-san in that state must’ve made her quite scared too. She already carries the sin of abandoning Mei-chan. What if, she’s the one who turns into a bloody pulp next time.

So as long as I have Mei-chan, Class Rep can’t make light of Mei-chan’s trusty partner that is me.

The condition known as fear is simple, yet absolute. You can't overcome it all that easily. Class Rep wouldn't ask the impossible of me unless we're in big danger. So I can believe in her. As long as she stays weaker than Mei-chan, that is.

"I see, alright, I will become the leader then. I may have some shortcomings, but let's all work together on this"

I make solitary applause congratulating Class Rep's new post.

But I'm not done yet. It's already impossible for everyone in this party to reconcile. So, even if I have to be a bit forceful, I'll make a place for me in it.

I've decided. It's sure to be a big policy change. Once I say this, there's no turning back.

But I'll do it. I have to do it.

"And, one more thing. Mei-chan even went so far as to duel Kenzaki-san to try and make me the leader. I want to give back to that so... I want to be appointed sub-leader"

"Wh-why you, we cannot allow this!"

"I'm, of course, not forcing this on you. We can do it fairly, with a vote. Well, if Souma-san doesn't want to run for the position, it can always go to me by default—"

"Then I am also announcing my candidacy. With that, I am now the sub-leader"

"Nope, not quite. We're both at a draw"

You're being a bit slow there, Souma Sakura. Did you perchance forget who that is, lying at your feet?

"Natsukawa-san and Takanashi-san are on your side right, Souma-san? But as for Kenzaki-san... She gets to be on mine"

"Wh-!?"

"Isn't that right, Mei-chan?"

Thank you, Mei-chan. This is the vote you won for my sake, this one, very

precious, blood-stained vote.

“Ah, Kotarou-kun... Yeah, yep, that’s right! Me and Kenzaki-san both vote for Kotarou-kun!”

Mei-chan replies bright as a sunflower. That’s great news, she finally stopped crying.

“Don’t you mock us! Momokawa-kun, what do you think a person’s free will is?!”

“It was in fact Kenzaki-san’s free will to do it like this right? Saying if she lost, she would listen to Mei-chan. Kenzaki Asuna, a proud swordsman of the Kenzaki Style, she swore it. Souma-san, you’re an outsider in this matter”

“That is just sophistry!”

“Then please go ahead and ask her after she wakes up. Ask her if her bet on the duel was a lie. Ask her if it was just some schoolgirl’s half-joking promise, ask her if that’s a promise she has not problem breaking. You ask her that alright?”

Kenzaki Asuna can’t do it. Especially with all that pride on the line. She can no longer go against Mei-chan. And finally, Mei-chan believes in me.

I’m truly grateful. Thanks to Mei-chan, I received the piece called Kenzaki Asuna. With this, I can more or less swing my weight around.

“I’m certain that if it’s Kenzaki-san, she will keep the promises that she makes. So if Mei-chan requests her to vote one way, Kenzaki-san will do it, even if she isn’t willing”

“I, I can’t... allow this, we cannot, allow this...”

“Whatever you think, we’re now both at two votes each. So the final decision would land on Class Rep—”

“Ryouko!!”

Souma Sakura shouts as if to make her appeal. I’ve been saying some pretty dicey stuff so Class Rep may just think I’m too dangerous and end up choosing Souma-san.

So now, I have to make the clincher. I'll let her know the merits of me being sub-leader.

"So Class Rep, before you make the call, can I just say something?"

"... Go on, Momokawa-kun"

"If I became sub-leader, I'd be basically following what you say. If it isn't an emergency situation like the surprise attack with the Mantis, I won't even bother you during fights. Though, if you need any advice, I'm always available. I can't really do much, but I'll work together with everyone, and I can promise to give it my best"

"O-oh, that would be helpful... Is that all?"

"If, by some odd chance, I don't become sub-leader... I will leave this party. Along with Mei-chan and Kenzaki-san, that is"

"-!?"

I'm taking Kenzaki Asuna hostage. With Souma Yuuto separated from you, Kenzaki-san is one of your indispensable vanguard members. You already have that extra baggage that is Takanashi-san so, can Natsukawa-san alone maintain your frontlines? And please remember that you even needed Mei-chan to beat that powerful Mantis. We still haven't made it past the Cave of Insects, so I really hope you're not thinking you can survive with just the 4 of you.

"Sorry, but if it looks like I can't get a good position, I don't think I can work with your team. I'm sure you have a ton of complaints about this, but just think of our circumstances as a whole, and bear with me. I think you can accept me, considering everything"

That's all I have to say. I played my hand. TURN END.

"It's all in your hands now, Class Rep"

"..."

Awkward silence once again dominates the space. Is she really still considering, or is it a form of resistance? Class Rep is smart, she should know the answer already.

"I'm sorry Sakura, but Momokawa-kun has a point"

“Ryouko! Why!?”

“Yuuto-kun isn’t here, and we can’t afford to take any chances. If we start losing people, we won’t make it far. We just can’t afford any infighting... So I’ve decided. Momokawa-kun, you’re the sub-leader. Good luck”

As if she’d made a tragic resolve, Class Rep had a grim, and somewhat tired face, as she extended her hand.

“Thanks. Let’s work hard so we don’t get any more casualties”

With the exchanging of this stiff handshake, despite its foundation now sustaining a massive crack, the worst harem party would continue its existence.

Author's Q&A: Arc.5

The theme for arc 5 is How do the cliché heroines react to a man besides the protagonist?, I suppose.

If we call Souma Yuuto the protagonist, you can pretty much say that, starting with Souma Sakura, all the pretty girls in Class 2-7 are his harem heroines. All those girls like Yuuto, sometimes coming on straightforwardly, sometimes getting him to pamper them, sometimes not being quite honest with themselves, they truly have attitudes that cute girls would have.

Now, how would these pretty, and on top of that, clearly in love, heroines interact with a guy who's not their protagonist, who they don't like, and who they don't think much of in the first place?

The answer to that would be the many types of ill treatment that Momokawa Kotarou has received from these girls in the 5th arc.

In my humble opinion, this Template Heroine that you often find is quite a stubborn existence. In other words, They don't break their character (archetype), and they always react in a predictable fashion. Something like that.

That's why Souma Sakura will always keep to her perfect and righteous personality, and Kenzaki Asuna will have an anachronistic sense of values.

This is a very important aspect for a Light Novel heroine. Stuff like Sakura being neat and lovely only when her brother is around, or Asuna dilly-dallying on her phone whenever Yuuto isn't looking, that sort of surface-level acted out persona, just doesn't happen.

It doesn't feel real for a female character, and even in fictional entertainment other than LNs, it should be a protected code. If they don't start off with the setting that they're actually faking everything, a character, especially a heroine, should be as she looks, as she feels, or else it's no good.

These straightforward personalities are great for LN heroines, and fantastic for the protagonist towards whom they seem to have boundless love... But what exactly are they, with their obstinate characters, to another guy in the

same fictitious world?

Kotarou: “They hate you once, and it’s pretty much over”

He speaks from experience. So it’s like this,

If it’s the protagonist, even if his relationship with the heroine takes a wrong turn, they can definitely recuperate and sometimes even deepen their relationship, and an event to accomplish this will be prepared for them. But if you’re not the protag, you won’t have destiny give you any helping hand. In a fictional world, the protag has the magical double-standard known as fate working wholly in his favor, and people other than him should just have normal, realistic lives like you and me. At least, it’s like that for this story. It’s not a nice and fluffy world where everyone everywhere can find happiness.

With that, after Kotarou was found out about masturbating in the fairy square, he instantly lost the trust of all those girls. For the protagonist, it would be just barely inside the line of recovery... But for those girls, the protag isn’t Kotarou but Souma Yuuto. And naturally, there’s no prepared event that conveniently has Kotarou regain their faith... So what happens is, he chooses to make something that was not supposed to happen, happen.

That would be, giving up on reconciling with the girls, and using the precursor of violence from Mei-chan, he forcefully plunders away a position and standing for himself.

Now then, Momokawa has resolved to take the position of sub-leader despite not actually wanting it. What will happen to him now? Please look forward to it in Arc 6.

With that, let’s start off the Q & A corner!

Q. So I haven’t read Kuro no Maou

A. I see this in the comments sometimes... And it’s honestly quite surprising.

I thought that my reputation was all Kuro no Maou, and that anyone reading this would be reading that one as well, but yeah, I guess there’s people like this too.

If you’ve read and liked Shaman, I’m sure Kuro no Maou will be also to your

liking. Currently, KnM also wins in the yandere department.

Q. Isn't announcing that Netorare and Rape aren't a thing useless and also diminishing for the breadth of the story?

A. I completely agree with you that it may be the case in the meta perspective of a story. In the stories found in Narou, you sometimes see these in the summaries or postscripts, and I get turned off too. I even think the author is being lazy in trying to make sure their readers don't drop the story.[1]

(TN: Narou, short for Shousetsuka ni Narou — Let's become an Author, is the site where a lot of Jap WNs come from. Including this one and KnM.)

But at least a warning like, Rated R-15, Violence and Profanity, should be placed in.

My, "Heroines are NOT raped or NTR'ed"... isn't quite similar to an R rating. It would be my credo, my personal policy if you will.

If this declaration happens to limit the level of anticipation you can feel reading, then sure it's a demerit to the story, but even at the risk of the readers' ire, I feel that it has value, and I stand true to my position. Meaning, you can't derive any pleasure from the defiling of a heroine from my stories. In both The Shaman can't become a Hero and Kuro no Maou, you have Violence and Profanity, and pretty dark plotlines, but you may have the misunderstanding that since we have those, we may have the heroine fall into some bad danger as well. I have my literary style, so I imagine there is meaning in me proclaiming, declaring, that that is not the case.

Not saying I denounce stories like that, but I have no interest in them, and will have no interest in writing something similar. Author's who can't show the heroine in a bind unless it involves a danger to their chastity, could be third-rate, or could simply like Rape and NTR, or whatever... but, I don't denounce any of that.

The Author should just write what they want. And I'll be writing how I feel like as well, thank you very much.

Q. Can Red Fever become something like a love curse by Black Bloodline?

A. It won't become a curse that makes someone fall for Kotarou. There'd be

no meaning if they fall in love with the MC without concern for his actions and personality, and something like falling in love through magic is just absurd.

Aren't you just in love because of his curse? If you ask this to Mei-chan, you may end up like Kanzaki Asuna. Let's be careful how we say things to a yandere.

Q. Don't any of the girls realize it's because Mei-chan loves Kotarou? They're girls, so they should have some intuition like that right?

A. It isn't like they never considered it. Rather, right around when they encountered, looking at how Kotarou and Mei-chan were interacting, everyone thought something to the likes of, "That Futaba, she's way too into him."

Just that, those girls thinking Mei-chan in love with Momokawa would only be the basic premise, and adding on how he's her savior and how they've been alone together ever since, all that together makes their final conclusions. For example, Souma Sakura even claimed their pure trust in each other is actually a "mind control" of sorts.

Anyway, all of them thought, and with reasonable minds, that "No one goes this far just for love". Yes reasonably, since these girls don't quite know what a yandere is.

Q. Mei-chan VS Kanzaki duel was pretty epic

A. I myself was pretty surprised. Among all chapters, this one got the most comments ever. The number of comments even topped a lot of Kuro no Maou chapters.

In all honesty, this part wasn't supposed to be in the 5th arc at all. I'd gotten a lot more story down, and it happened when I went back revising. The duel was supposed to be had much later. So the duel part coming in on the 5th arc was something I decided almost right before posting it.

I was a bit nervous about this at first... But I made a firm decision.

You gotta have these things in the story where it fits the easiest.

Plus, there was the accumulating frustration from these worst harem members so... Suck it, violent bitch!

With a small bit of vengeance, you got Mei-chan showing off her yandere

prowess quite nicely.

Man, yanderes are, soo best.

Q. How's Mei-chan's Yandere-level now?

A. Mei-chan's levels have gotten pretty high but... compared to Lily and the rest, it needs more fine tuning.[2]

(TN: As in Lily, Fiona, Nell + ??? from Kuro no Maou.)

What I means is, it's not about her level of love as a yandere, but a difference in the concept so to speak.

The main yandere heroines of Kuro no Maou were made quite high spec. The strongest of them being Lily who started off that epic Great Yandere War... but Mei-chan began as an honest to goodness sow with a power level of 0. She's become the type who'll be leveling up alongside Kotarou. So from the start, or rather, even after becoming a Berserker, she can't be willful with her love. And she isn't able to read his mind through telepathy, and isn't any kind of genius either. She doesn't come with any cheat tier powers, and so Mei-chan can only act as someone who was, until recently, just a normal student.

Meaning, she isn't able to have the situation in the palm of her hand. She got Kotarou mad at her for the duel and thus even cried, so clearly she can't aim for the perfect result. Looking at said results, she makes way too many mistakes compared to someone like Lily... but, that's exactly why, she can display a different genre of yandere-ism, in my opinion.

She can't be a genius doing anything and everything perfectly, so she musters up every scrap of her brains, and with love, courage and violence, Mei-chan becomes a yandere suited to her.

Q. At the time of their duel, how much of a Stats difference was there between Mei-chan and Asuna?

A. Mei-chan in terms of power, and Asuna for speed. But there really wasn't that much of a gap. Their only difference would be, just as Asuna guessed, that one of them had years of combat experience... But Mei-chan was able to overcome that with guts and fury.

If they were both in pristine condition and fought with their all with killing intent, Asuna had a good chance to win too. Well, if we're talking all out, Mei-chan has her Reagent X available, so Asuna's chances of winning aren't to the point of overwhelming.

Q. Mei-chan throwing the sword, then mounting, then beat down, didn't I see it in that Drifters anime recently?

A. I watched it too! Drifters, it's hella fun.[3]

(TN: [Link to animu](#))

I've been reading the drifters manga since before writing this story, but I had no intention of ripping it off alright? No really, please believe me.

Though I do say so myself, Mei-chan winning like this doesn't have much bearing on the plot. Throwing the weapon, or splashing sand on the eyes are both things that have come to be from long ago, and it isn't easy to inspire something new from that.

Anyway, the point of the battle was that once Mei-chan got a hold of Kenzaki, the fight was over. Those techniques used were just thrown in. Something like throwing a sword or using sand would come as obvious to Mei-chan, a (former) normal girl.

Q. Only scum get off on girls getting pummeled in the face

A. Well, I admit it's fun to read about, but for the parties concerned, they might think it horrendous having to see such an atrocious scene.

Of course, being the one writing it is quite fun too.

Q. With just Kenzaki losing, Souma Sakura loses her edge in the votes huh

A. I was surprised that some readers actually guessed this before the last chapter in arc 5. Just goes to show, Shaman has some sharp readers too.

It's just as Kotarou said. Them attaining Kenzaki Asuna's vote would, at the present time, let them confront Souma Sakura and rival her say. And in reality, the results of the majority vote depended on who could convince Class Rep better.

Now Class Rep, as leader you must take responsibility and own to your

decision.

Q. Class Rep: “Stop... c’mon STAHP...”[4]

(TN: There’s a pun / meme here involving Roger Clemens the baseball player. like Yametekuremensu. Yametekure meaning please stop. As for why Clemens, fuck if I know.)

A. Stuck between a rock that is Kotarou’s arguments and a hard place that is Sakura’s appeal to emotion, and on top of that, being subjected to the sheer weight of her guilt and fear in regards to Mei-chan, our Class Rep, Kisaragi Ryouko, is so very close to passing that fine line that is her limit.

But having been put in the position of someone with common sense, we’re gonna have to have her work with this from now on, without breaking down of course.

Regarding Class Rep’s attitude when the subject of duels came up, or when Kotarou was made sub-leader, it has been said that she just lets it happen and lacks the ability to make a firm decision. But we need to understand that Class Rep isn’t some experienced, veteran politician, but simply a girl who was assigned the role of Class Representative. It’s a bit harsh to expect her to anticipate everyone else’s emotions and conduct herself in the most optimal manner.

Just being able to calmly deal with circumstances that could make others crazy makes Class Rep quite a splendid person.

That being said, there’s going to be a lot more trouble coming, so good luck, you Class Rep, you!

Q. Natsukawa-san isn’t becoming air is she?

A. She was asleep along with Kotori during the duel, and after witnessing Asuna all bashed up, she was only shaking, also with Kotori. So please forgive her for not being able to speak up.

Q. He uses Ointment A a lot, but there’s B and C too right?

A. They’re there, but as of currently, there wasn’t any incident of them being poisoned, paralyzed, or gone down with a fever, so there simply hasn’t been a

chance to use them.

Kotarou has Ointment A made in larger quantities since it works on external wounds, but he hasn't neglected keeping a stock of B and C in his bag too.

Q. Kurono and Meiko are both Berserker characters, but their outside and inside are completely flipped huh?

A. So you realized.

That's correct, I more or less intentionally did this one. In Kuro no Maou, the protagonist, Kurono, has a face that makes your skin crawl with the Berserker feeling, but inside, he's a really nice guy.

On the other hand, you have the big busty bishoujo that is Mei-chan who can make the sweetest face while bashing another girl's face in. Her heart's already gone all Berserker.

They're both blatantly written to my preferences, so It'd be great if you can appreciate this small contrast.

Alright, that should be it for this time.